

Community Schools and the Elections



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

Today's Q&A is with [Marisa Saunders](#), associate director for research at UCLA's Center for Community Schooling. Dr. Saunders has conducted extensive research that explores the potential and challenges associated with college and career pathways. Her scholarship focuses on K-12 transformation efforts aimed to address long-standing educational inequalities, including the 2017 book, *Learning Time: In Pursuit of Educational Equity*.

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

Today, community schools are often defined as those that use a whole-child approach, with an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement. As a school improvement strategy, they bring together a range of interest-holders to identify and respond to the needs and assets of the local community. Though the current community-school movement

is now unifying around this set of principles, pillars, and features, community schooling has evolved through history and different components have shown up in schools and in programs for well over a half-century.

The federal government has engaged in community schools historically as part of its broader commitment to addressing educational inequality and supporting holistic child development. Federal involvement in community schools increased significantly during the 1960s with President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." Programs like *Head Start*, created under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, embodied early principles of community schools by acknowledging that schools alone cannot address the underlying problems associated with poverty.

Community schools also have strong roots in the century-long press for democratic, locally governed schools and the egalitarian belief that a common system of schooling should prepare all students to freely pursue their passions and participate fully in society. These roots were strengthened in the civil rights era, and formalized in federal policies that accelerated community school development, such as the Community Schools Act of 1974 and the Community Schools and Comprehensive Community Education Act of 1978.

These efforts laid the groundwork for our most recent instantiation of community schools, supported by the federal government's Full-Service Community Schools Program, beginning in 2008. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the idea of schools as well-positioned to provide much needed services and resources for children and families.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement in community schools been helpful or harmful to preparing minoritized students and/or students from low-income families?*

Federal government support for community schools recognizes that schools are well-positioned to provide whole child and family supports that can prepare minoritized students and those from low-income families for academic success by addressing the needs of the whole child. A seminal report, published in 2017, [*Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence*](#), synthesized the findings from 143 rigorous research studies on the impact of community schools on student and school outcomes. The report finds that, when implemented well, community schools can help students overcome challenges such as lack of access to high-quality learning and out-of-school barriers to learning. Federal investments provide opportunities to realize systemic change that can explore the role of schools in addressing the new and growing needs of students and families.

Beyond critical integrated student supports, these investments also draw attention to school and system designs in which each and every child has an opportunity to experience enriching and transformative learning and youth development. Emerging research from the [*Science of Learning and Development*](#) elevates the importance of student-centered approaches and bolsters whole child policies such as Full-Service

Community Schools. Research has dramatically expanded the field's understanding of how biology and environmental factors interact to drive human learning and development. The emerging science identifies supportive school environments, social-emotional learning, instructional strategies that support motivation and engagement, and a system of supports for whole student achievement and growth that are found in community schools.

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

Rather than shift, I would say that federal support for community schooling needs to deepen its commitment to more inclusive, locally driven approaches. This could build on the Biden administration's Whole Child Initiative, which emphasizes a holistic approach to student development that goes beyond academics. It advocates for schools to address the social, emotional, mental, and physical needs of students, ensuring that all aspects of a child's well-being are supported. The current administration also has focused on creating environments where students can thrive, which includes access to healthy meals, mental health services, social-emotional learning, and safe, nurturing environments both in and out of school. Integrating the government's Full-Service Community Schools grant, which is a more targeted financial initiative, can help build comprehensive, community-focused support systems in specific schools beyond its current focus on critical wraparound services. By doing so, the federal government can help transform schools into spaces that not only serve but celebrate the diverse cultural assets of their communities. This transformation is essential for creating learning environments where students from all backgrounds can thrive academically and socially.

Based on our own research at the UCLA Center for Community Schooling, the federal government should take the following four steps:

1. Prioritize policies that allow local communities to have greater flexibility in shaping their community schools. This includes flexibility in how funds are allocated, allowing schools to direct resources based on the specific needs, values, and strengths of their community;
2. Include support for professional development that emphasizes culturally responsive teaching and leadership practices. Educators need training on how to integrate the cultural and linguistic assets of students and their families into the curriculum and daily school practices;
3. Support efforts to build strong partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations through a dual capacity framework; and
4. Encourage the use of data to assess student and community needs, but the data should be interpreted through the lens of local knowledge. This could mean incorporating community feedback mechanisms and ensuring that data are not used solely to compare schools nationally but to improve them contextually.

Our deep partnership with local community schools, and our current learning from

grantees across California through the state's \$4.1 billion investment in community schools through the California Community Schools Partnership Program, make clear that with high-level investment we can reimagine and transform schools into inclusive, racially just, and relationship-centered environments that prepare all youth for positive social and emotional development, engaged citizenship, and deep learning.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

The RNC platform does not address community schools. Project 2025 suggests reducing the emphasis on community-centered approaches. It aims to phase out Title I funding, which is critical for schools serving low-income students, shifting control to states over a 10-year period. The overall agenda promotes vouchers, which would divert public funds to private education options, threatening the agency of local communities and the sustainability of community schools.

In contrast, the DNC national platform strongly supports the expansion of community schools as part of its broader education strategy. It views public schools not just as centers for learning but as critical community hubs. In line with this, the platform advocates for the expansion of community schools as a means of providing comprehensive supports to students, particularly in underserved communities, advancing equitable access to resources that can enhance students' academic success and overall well-being.

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

The DNC platform indicates that they are committed to evidence-based programs and pedagogical approaches (such as community schools), including assessments that consider the well-being of the whole student and recognize the range of ways students can demonstrate learning. This suggests an approach that will reimagine our education systems guided by the interest-holders who know our students best. Project 2025 outlines an extensive plan that could significantly reshape public education in the U.S., including the rollback of regulatory protections for marginalized students, which would undermine equity initiatives in schools. Its approach would undermine the effectiveness and prevalence of community schools.

Prior newsletters in this series:

[*What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Education Policy?*](#)

[*Help or Harmful? The Federal Role in Supporting Students with Disabilities in Schools*](#)

[*Protections Against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination in Schools: The Federal Role*](#)

[Federally Funded School Vouchers: Contrasting Party Views](#)

[Testing and Accountability: The Federal Role](#)

[Early Childhood Education and the 2024 Elections](#)

[What Will Happen to Bilingual Education After the Elections?](#)

[National School Lunch Program and the 2024 Elections](#)

NEPC Resources on Community Schools

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