

# **Creating Safe and Supportive Schools: A Community Schools Model at Work**

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*With the goal of creating a safe and supportive environment, a collaborative group of school districts in Wayne County, NY utilize a Community Schools model to gather and organize resources. Through experience, and collected data, administrators in this group have supported the development of culturally responsive trauma-informed community schools that integrate school and community resources to provide evidenced-based and restorative practices organized by a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). It appears that a significant correlation exists between the implementation of these practices and improvement in several key categories regarding the well-being of our young people.*

*Keywords: community schools, trauma-informed, restorative practices, MTSS*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Even before the outbreak of a global pandemic, the challenges faced by school systems across the United States were unprecedented in their scope and intensity (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2020). In a rural area of New York State, situated along Lake Ontario between Rochester and Syracuse, several districts in Wayne County, NY (including Lyons, Sodus, North Rose-Wolcott, and Clyde-Savannah) are facing particularly dire circumstances. The Evalumetrics Youth Survey, a derivative of the Risk and Protective Factor research, has been taken bi-yearly by 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from all 11 school districts in the County and has provided us with areas of focus in addressing these concerns (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). In 2015, this included more than 15% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade respondents reporting a lack of attachment to their family, poor family discipline, and a lack of family supervision and rules. In addition, more than 20% acknowledged an elevated sense of rebelliousness and more than 2/3rds had five or more risk factors.

In many districts, schools have become the hub of the community response to these concerns, providing not only for the students' academic needs, but for their social, emotional, and physical needs as well. To find success in such a complex environment, it is critical to systematically access and utilize resources both within and outside of the walls of our schools (Hester, 2019). Schools in this region are doing so by following a Community Schools model.

Finger Lakes Community Schools, under the leadership of Jay Roscup, aims to "Support the development of culturally responsive trauma-informed community schools that integrate school and community resources to provide evidenced-based and restorative practices organized by a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)" (Finger Lakes Community Schools, n.d.). This statement encompasses what we consider to be the major components of intervention on behalf of our young people: 1) Culturally

Responsive, 2) Trauma-Informed, 3) Community Engaged, 4) Restorative Practices, and 5) MTSS. In our experience, most districts are doing a wide variety of positive work with their students and families, often in isolation, not connected to a broader goal or organized for maximum effectiveness and efficiency. The Community Schools structure allows us to do so.

The Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership says: “Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities” (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.). This is a movement away from schools acting alone and towards active partnerships with community entities. It includes practices as diverse as parent workgroups, therapy provided by outside agencies, oral care from local dentists, and support from neighborhood literacy organizations, often within the friendly and familiar confines of the school building itself.

The first lens we view this work through is culturally responsive practices, which focus on equity, in all its forms. We have worked extensively with Dr. Bryant Marks from Morehouse College around the concept of implicit bias, which he defines as “varying degrees of stereotyping, prejudice and/or discrimination below conscious awareness in a manner that benefits oneself or one’s group; it involves limited or distorted perceptions of others. It is everywhere and affects everyone. We are all biased” (Weber, 2016). To achieve a community school that embraces all of its stakeholders, it is critical to expand understanding of issues related to diversity and inclusion, increase cultural competency, and offer a variety of growth opportunities for all members of our school community. We have been supported in this work by the Family and Community Engagement Program, under the umbrella of the New York State My Brother’s Keeper initiative (New York State Education Department, n.d.).

Creating a trauma-informed and safe and supportive school environment has been a primary focus of our work of the last three years. Utilizing the research of Dr. Bruce Perry and Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, along with our collaboration with Leslie University and the Trauma and Learning Policy Institute, we have worked to spread awareness and implementation of trauma-sensitive practices across over thirty school districts and more than a dozen conferences. Moving the conversation from “What is wrong with that student?” to “What happened to that student?”, and ultimately to “What’s right with that student?” has been a critical shift in the journey of empathy for educators (Ginwright, 2018). The **ARC** Framework developed by Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2018) initially provided us with three primary domains of intervention to organize this work, **Attachment**, **Regulation (Self)**, and **Competency**. Over the last 2 years, Finger Lakes Community Schools has consulted the work of The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the Trauma Learning Policy Institute and Lesley University to extend this model to include the importance of **Health** and organizing cross sector collaboration. This evolution has led to the use of the term “**Collaboration ARCH**”, which we continually consult as a measure of our work.

A key component of our model is community partnerships and engagement. Many of the school districts of Wayne County have cultivated relationships to meet the diverse needs of their students. This includes, but is not limited to, organizations that provide the following: Family, relationship, and substance abuse counseling, social work services, emergency housing, food pantries, physical and mental health supports, parent/adult education, mentoring, and many other services. Much of this work has been organized by the creation of the Wayne County Partnership for Strengthening Families (WCPSF). WCPSF has a membership of 43 agencies, organizations, and school districts, including all eleven school districts in Wayne County. It meets quarterly around three objectives: Increasing academic performance, improving behavioral health, and, improving support systems for families (Wayne County Partnership for Strengthening Families, n.d.). Additionally, community members volunteer their services in our schools, providing a much-needed extra set of hands or smiling face for our students and teachers.

Restorative practices represent our most recent work and integrate seamlessly with our work on cultural-relevancy, trauma-informed care, and MTSS. Dr. Tom Cavanagh of Restorative Justice Education has worked closely with us to implement a train-the-trainer model of restorative practices in our region. Dr. Cavanagh’s mission is “to establish caring relationships through the implementation of a Culture of Care in schools, with the goal of helping ethnically diverse students to flourish” (Restorative Justice Education, n.d.). The focus of this work is on building a strong, vibrant community that repairs the

harm caused when schoolwide expectations are not met. This represents an exchange of the traditional philosophies of punitive responses to misbehavior for a “whole-school, relational approach to building school climate and addressing student behavior that fosters belonging over exclusion, social engagement over control, and meaningful accountability over punishment” (The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue, 2019).

While utilizing culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and restorative practices is critical to supporting our school community, we need to organize these practices to maximize their impact and avoid the pitfalls of working in silos. MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) drives this work in our school districts. Under the guidance of the Midwest PBIS Network, which functions as a hub of the Center on PBIS, a national technical assistance partnership funded from the U.S. Department of Education, we have worked diligently to establish a three-tiered response to student need. Tier I represents our universal practices, or what all students receive every day. This includes clear expectations, physical and emotional safety, engaging instruction, and being treated with dignity and respect. Our goal is for Tier I to be sufficient for 80% of our students. Tier II is for students who need some additional support to find success. This includes small group interventions, such as group counseling, math and reading labs, and group mentoring and tutoring. We estimate approximately 15% of our students will need this level of support. Tier III is for the 5% of our students who need the most support. Often, individualized plans are created for them. These plans include our most intensive interventions, often utilizing resources from both the school and local community. With our finite resources, it is crucial we systematically approach intervention. In the tradition of PBIS, we utilize nationally referenced research and combine data, systems, and practices to best meet the needs of each of our students (Pinkelman & Horner, 2019).

Following the Community Schools philosophy has allowed us to address the challenges of rural poverty in a proactive and thoughtful manner. By focusing on practices that are culturally-relevant, trauma-informed, and restorative, and leveraging community partnerships along the way, we have created a Multi-Tiered System of Support in each district that methodically assists our young people in meeting high expectations. In the last four years, risk factors in the key areas previously mentioned have decreased (Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**WAYNE COUNTY 12<sup>th</sup> GRADE STUDENTS**

	<b>2015</b>	<b>2019</b>
Lack Attachment to Family	16.9%	10.8%
Poor Family Discipline	15.3%	11.3%
Lack of Family Supervision & Rules	17.5%	14.4%
Rebelliousness	21.0%	11.0%
12 <sup>th</sup> graders have 5 or more risk factors	66.4%	32.1%

\*Note: Data from the Evalumetrics Youth Survey in 2015 and 2019

Although there will always be work to be done, it is evident the work of the last five years has had a significantly positive impact on the children of Wayne County and we are excited to continue evolving and improving our support of their needs.

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