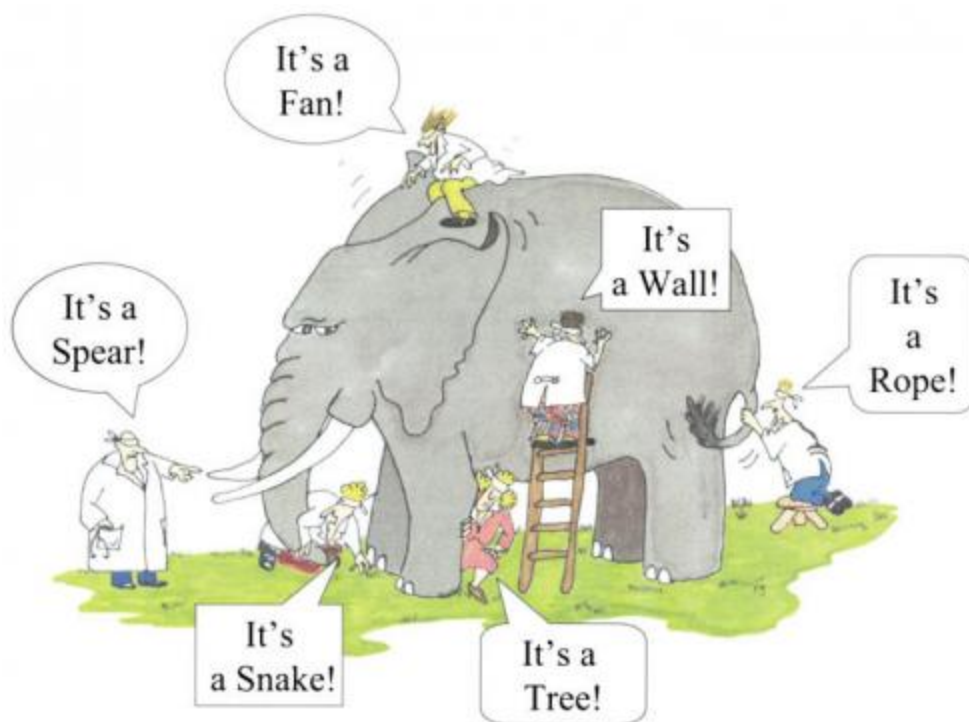


## Making Sense of Community School Pillars, Benchmarks, and Mechanisms

### Introduction:

Given the resurgence of Community School approaches in education today, a number of stakeholders -- researchers, activists, administrators, and more -- have sought to further define what exactly constitutes a Community School. Often, these definitions are similar, but not quite identical. You hopefully noticed the overlaps and also the divergence when reviewing the pillars and benchmarks. Many times, the perspective of the group or individual influences the lens through which certain components, or pillars, are emphasized over others. This accounts for a situation not unlike the famous parable of the blind men describing the elephant, pictured in the below cartoon.



How then, are we to make sense of the different understandings of community schools? And moreover, how do we understand the connection between the benchmarks as articulated in this blended learning guide and the Community School pillars?

We can start by thinking of the pillars as a representation of the Community School vision. Given that there is no standardized cookie-cutter model of what a Community School looks like, there is no universal set of pillars. Like the elephant pictured above, community schooling as a movement is broader than the pillars -- it is a set of values that informs an approach to education and society. The values include a regard for education as interconnected with life outside the school walls, a respect for local knowledge and culture, social justice and equity,

and more cohesive social bonds. Because these principals are abstract, the Community School pillars provide a more tangible roadmap to how these values manifest at a school. But if there is no universal set of pillars, which set of pillars do we use? This is a decision that is unique to every local initiative, but we encourage you to learn all you can about all the different pillars out there, and be as comprehensive as possible in your understanding of community schooling.

If we were designing a new school from scratch, we might be able to integrate these values and the pillars into the school from the onset. We would hire staff who are aligned to these pillars (articulated below) and values, and students and families would understand the disposition of the school from the start. However, because we often are in the position of transforming schools that already exist and may not reflect community school values or pillars, it is necessary to have a process for embarking on our transformative work in a strategic way that embodies the values of community schooling in the change process. This means that change should not be top-down, but rather, in collaboration with the community. The community school benchmarks provide a roadmap for building relationships, collective visioning, and grassroots-driven improvement that builds the capacity of the school and community to drive the process of Community School transformation.

Think of the pillars as an attempt to describe the Community Schools vision, and the benchmarks as a means to that end. Going through the benchmarks, it is important to always have the end in mind, and apply the tools in the benchmarks as they are needed to pursue the community schools vision or pillars. The conversations you have with stakeholders in your visioning process and the goals you decide to focus on in your improvement work should all be aligned to the pillars. It might make sense to check in as you go through the benchmarks and reflect -- is our approach to these benchmarks getting us closer to realizing the Community School pillars at our school?

### **The NEA Community School Pillars:**

NEA's research and study of successful and transformational Community Schools has led to a description of common elements, which we call pillars. These pillars describe the strategies and values those schools have used to achieve sustainable success. Other well respected research organizations have studied successful Community Schools and have articulated 4 pillars, such as the [Partnership for the Future of Learning](#) (PFL). Below you will find the NEA 6 pillars. We should point out that NEA supports the PFL's 4 pillars because we view the four pillars as differing only in emphasis as opposed to differing in strategy or values.

1. ***Strong and Proven Culturally Relevant Curriculum:*** Educators provide a rich and varied academic program allowing students to acquire both foundational and advanced knowledge and skills in many negative content areas. Students learn with challenging, culturally relevant materials that address their learning needs and expand their experience. They also learn how to analyze and understand the unique experiences and perspectives of others. The curriculum embraces all content areas including the arts, second languages, and physical education. Teachers and ESP are

engaged in developing effective programs for language instruction for English learners and immigrant students. Rigorous courses such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate are offered. Learning and enrichment activities are provided before and after the regular school day, including sports, the arts, and homework assistance. The needs of parents and families are addressed through programs like English as a Second Language classes, GED preparation, and job training programs. These supports are based on identified needs.

2. **High-quality Teaching and Learning:** Consistent with NEA Resolutions, educators are fully licensed, knowledgeable about their content, and skillful in their practice. Instructional time focuses on learning and the use of authentic assessment rather than high-stakes testing. Individual student needs are identified and learning opportunities are designed to address them. Higher-order thinking skills are at the core of instruction so that all students acquire problem solving, critical thinking, and reasoning skills. Educators work collaboratively to plan lessons, analyze student work, and adjust curriculum as required. Experienced educators work closely with novices as mentors, coaches, and “guides on the side,” sharing their knowledge and expertise. ESP members take part in professional learning experiences and are consulted and collaborate when plans to improve instruction are developed. Together, educators identify the methods and approaches that work and change those that do not meet student needs.

3. **Inclusive Leadership:** Leadership teams with educators, the community school coordinator, and other school staff share the responsibility of school operations with administrators. This leadership team ensures that the community school strategy remains central in the decision-making process.

4. **Positive Behavior Practices (including restorative justice):** Community School educators emphasize positive relationships and interactions and model these through their own behavior. Negative behaviors are acknowledged and addressed in ways that hold students accountable while showing them they are still valued members of the school community. All members of the faculty and staff are responsible for ensuring a climate where all students can learn. Restorative behavior practices such as peer mediation, community service, and post-conflict resolution help students learn from their mistakes and foster positive, healthy school climates where respect and compassion are core principles. Zero-tolerance practices leading to suspension and expulsion are avoided.

5. **Family and Community Partnerships:** Families, parents, caregivers, and community members are partners in creating dynamic, flexible community schools. Their engagement is not limited to a specific project or program, but is on-going and extends beyond volunteerism to roles in decision making, governance, and advocacy. Both ESP and teachers are part of developing family engagement strategies, and they are supported through professional learning opportunities. Their voices are critical to articulating and achieving the school’s overall mission and goals. When families and educators work together, students are more engaged learners who earn higher grades and enroll in more challenging classes; student attendance and grade and school completion rates improve.

**6. *Coordinated and Integrated Wraparound Supports (community support services):***

Community school educators recognize that students often come to school with challenges that impact their ability to learn, explore, and develop in the classroom. Because learning does not happen in isolation, community schools provide meals, health care, mental health counseling, and other services before, during, and after school. Staff members support the identification of services that children need. These wraparound services are integrated into the fabric of the school that follows the Whole Child tenets. Connections to the community are critically important, so support services and referrals are available for families and other community members.

**Community School Implementation Mechanisms:**

While various organizations have articulated different pillars of Community Schools, those same organizations all agree there are 4 major implementation mechanisms.

1. ***Community School Coordinator (CSC):*** Every community school should have a Community School Coordinator who plays a leadership role at the school, is a member of the school leadership team, and works full-time at one school. The CSC has training and specialized skills that supports building and managing partnerships in diverse communities, creating and coordinating an integrated network of services for students and their families, building teams of stakeholders, and optimizing both internal and external resources.

2. ***Needs and Assets Assessment:*** The foundation for the community school model is a school and community based needs and asset assessment. The needs and asset assessment, facilitated by the CSC, is an inclusive process in which families, students, community members, partners, teachers, ESP, administrators, and other school staff define their needs and assets. Problem-solving teams are established based on the priorities determined in the needs and asset assessment.

3. ***Stakeholder Problem-solving Teams:*** Every community school should have teams of school staff, families, students, and community members dedicated to solving problems that are identified in the needs and asset assessment. The solutions identified by the stakeholder problem-solving teams change the way things are done in and outside of school hours and, at times, involve partnerships with outside organizations and individuals.

4. ***Community School Stakeholder & Partner Coordination:*** All successful Community Schools coordinate between school staff, partners (organizations, businesses, town and city service providers), and stakeholders to ensure goals are achieved and obstacles are surmounted. The coordination includes families, community partners, school staff, students, and other stakeholders from the school's various constituencies. They work in collaboration with the school leadership team and support coordination across the school and community.

**Mechanisms, Pillars, and Benchmarks Working Together:**

When a school becomes a Community School, they hire a Community School Coordinator. This is the first mechanism that is activated. One of the first major tasks of the Community School Coordinator is to form and coordinate teams of students, staff, families, and community members in a needs/assets assessment (Mechanism #2). The byproduct of the needs/asset assessment is a determination of where stakeholders want to focus their improvement efforts. The CSC helps the stakeholders make a decision on where to focus and helps stakeholders form problem solving teams (Mechanism #3). Some of the problems that these teams try to solve will involve searching for partners and then forming partnerships to help solve an identified need. Most schools and communities require many partnerships in order to achieve their goals. As such, there is a lot of coordination and communication needed between the school and the partners to make sure the sum is greater than the individual parts (Mechanism 4).

There are key steps or actions that are important to follow to successfully implement the mechanisms. These are the benchmarks. For example, the second mechanism is the needs/assets assessment. But a CSC can't directly jump from being hired and go directly into the implementation of the n/a assessment. Instead, when a Community School Coordinator first starts their job, since most likely they didn't go to school to become a Community School Coordinator, there is a lot of learning they need to do to, first and foremost, to understand how to do their role successfully. Benchmark number 1 is designed to provide the CSC and other key stakeholders with the background they need to get started.

Note: While there are 8 benchmarks, which are numbered sequentially, many of the tasks found in the various benchmarks are started in one benchmark and completed in a subsequent benchmark. For example, CSCs learn about the needs/assets assessment and start some early preparation for the n/a assessment in benchmark number 1 and 2, even though the main execution of the n/a assessment plan isn't until benchmark 6. Because of the frequent need for CSCs to start a task in one benchmark and then complete the task later in another benchmark, we created [this](#) syllabus to visually map the benchmarks. In summary, all of the benchmarks are needed to successfully implement the 4 mechanisms.

As Community Schools select their priorities, they need to overlay their focus areas with the pillars and determine whether they are excelling in each pillar area. The CSC and stakeholders should regularly evaluate their efforts and determine which pillars need more attention.

Successful Community Schools can be measured by their performance against the pillars, using the mechanisms and benchmarks to make that happen.