



Community Schools—Unlike Voucher Programs—Actually Address Poverty

Baltimore City's unrest in the wake of Freddie Gray's death raised a lot of questions about cycles of poverty and how they can best be addressed. While much of the focus was on criminal justice reform and police accountability, many leaders called for more job creation, expanded public transportation options, and better schools. Advocates for privatizing education with public tax dollars were amongst those voices—using the media attention to blame public schools and call for voucher programs.

But while those advocates claim that voucher programs would help eliminate opportunity gaps, the reality is very different. The tuition assistance that comes from tax credit voucher programs—like BOAST—rarely covers anywhere near the full cost of attendance at private schools. Studies in states with similar programs have found that these publicly funded scholarships merely make it easier for wealthy families to send their children to private school.

The vast majority of tax credit voucher recipients are already enrolled in private school. For example, a recent report by the Southern Education Foundation found that most of the students receiving tax credit vouchers through a similar system in Georgia did not come from public schools. From 2007, the year before the program was enacted, through 2009, private school enrollment increased by only one-third of one percent in the metropolitan counties that included most of the private schools in the scholarship program.



Meanwhile, teachers at the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School—the community school located near the epicenter of the unrest in Baltimore—used their training in trauma-informed behavioral management to give their students creative outlets to express their anxiety in the aftermath of the unrest. Such a moment captures the more effective approach in closing opportunity gaps: giving public schools the resources and tools they need to help their students overcome disadvantages and be successful.

Public school performance most often reflects the affluence of the families they serve. Offering every family an escape isn't possible—the only way to cut off cycles of poverty is to intervene early by investing in people and their communities. That's the premise behind community schools.

Closing Maryland's Opportunity Gaps with Community Schools

While Maryland consistently ranks as a top state for public education, socioeconomically disadvantaged students often need support beyond the classroom. Poverty dramatically and negatively affects the wellbeing of children, particularly in the areas of physical health, mental health, safe housing, access to technology, parental support, family planning services and education, youth employment, and nutrition. Each of these factors play a large role in whether students are able to learn and do well in school—making it imperative that these opportunity gaps be closed if we want to provide equitable education in our communities.



What Are Community Schools?

Community schools are designed to close these opportunity gaps by making the school a hub for essential services that students in disadvantaged communities lack. These schools generally have the following four components:

- They serve a high concentration of students in poverty
- They employ a full-time coordinator to lead community school-related services
- They conduct a needs assessment of their student population to identify key obstacles to learning and the services needed to close opportunity gaps
- They work with community partners to bring those needed services into the school building or nearby locations to make them accessible to students and community members

Community School Showcase: Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove

In 2011, Benjamin Franklin High School received \$5 million for renovations and school leaders used the opportunity to make it a community school. With the help of the University of Maryland School of Social Work, they brought in Dante M. de Tablan as their community school coordinator and added 3,000 square feet of space for community programs, including mental health services, an early-childhood program serving children of teen parents, and workforce development programs.

The school formed a community leadership team, including administrators, de Tablan, local partners, staff, parents, local residents, and students. That team assessed the needs of the school and determined how partners could be helpful—determining which evidence-based programs would meet the needs expressed by the community. This included enrolling 100% of eligible students in the free and reduced meal program, partnering with United Way to prevent 60 families from becoming homeless, and repurposing space for students who had previously dropped out to receive job training.

Since 2011, Benjamin Franklin High School has been transformed from one of the city's lowest-performing schools into a top school, and enrollment has increased from 226 to 437 students. When it was previously a middle school, only 26 percent of the 8th graders were scoring in the proficient range in math on the Maryland School Assessment. In the 2013-14 school year, 71 percent of 12th graders scored at the proficient level in algebra. Now 95% of parents would recommend the school to others.



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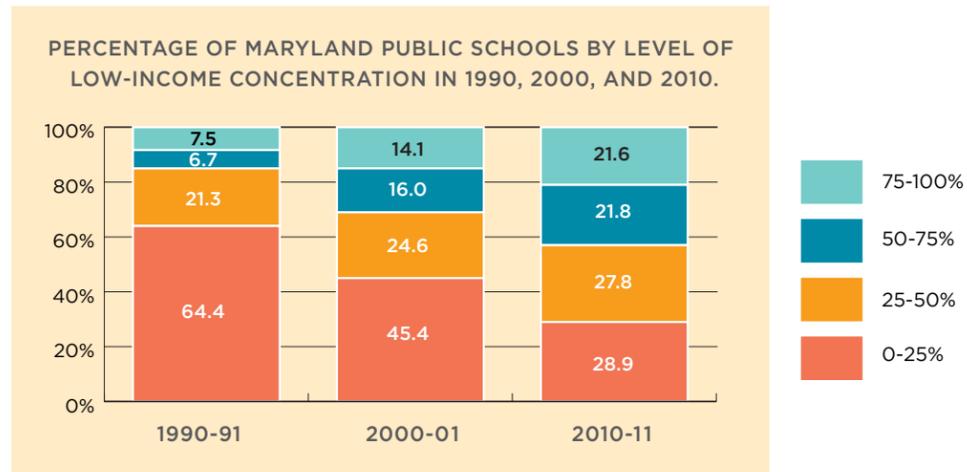
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Maryland's Growing Poverty Problem

In November 2014, the Maryland Equity Project—a research group in the University of Maryland College of Education—released a study showing the percentage of Maryland public school students in poverty (determined by eligibility for free and reduced meals) nearly doubled between 1990 and 2010, growing from 22.4% to 40.1%. According to Maryland State Department of Education data, the percentage increased to 45.2% in the 2014-2015 school year.

This growth in poverty has largely taken place in concentrated pockets of economic disadvantage. There are nine school districts that are now majority low-income: Washington (50.1%), Kent (52.2%), Allegany (56.3%), Caroline (57.3%), Wicomico (59.6%), Prince George's (64.6%), Dorchester (66.2%), Baltimore City (84.2%), and Somerset (89.1%).



Source: Trends in Maryland Public School Enrollment: Student Poverty, Maryland Equity Project

Mental Health Treatment

One of the most damaging aspects of living in areas with high concentrations of poverty is the trauma that comes with witnessing violent crime. There is now ample evidence showing that trauma can hurt the development of children's brains—especially in areas involving attention, memory, and behavior control.

Witnessing constant violence—from waking up in the middle of the night to the sounds of gun shots, to seeing bullet holes in the sidewalk on the way to school, to seeing shootings and knowing the victims—creates one of the largest opportunity gaps in schools today. Without the treatment to manage the trauma, children exposed to violence face greater rates of future criminal activity, unemployment, homelessness, and physical health issues.

Community schools have the ability to bring in the community services that help identify children suffering trauma and provide the treatment they need. For example, the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School (HSCT)—a community school in the Upton/Druid Heights neighborhood of Baltimore City—worked with community partners to train more than 200 teachers and school staff in trauma-informed behavioral management to manage students' stress and anxiety from witnessing violence. HSCT has since seen great improvements in student motivation and attendance, earning Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's award for the greatest reduction of students at-risk for chronic absenteeism.

Nutrition

Hunger and malnutrition are huge obstacles to learning. Educators say that when students regularly come to their class hungry, those kids struggle to concentrate, lack the energy to learn, and have poor academic performance. According to the American Psychological Association, hungry children are significantly more likely to receive special education services, repeat a grade level, or show anxious, irritable, and aggressive behavior than their non-hungry peers.

While there has been progress in expanding enrollment in school breakfast and lunch programs—including in Baltimore City, where all public school students now receive free breakfast and lunch—there are other meals that kids miss if they can't get them at home. Other children don't have access to nutritious meals because their families live in food deserts or face other barriers to healthy food.

In the same way schools act as hubs for weekday breakfast and lunch, they can also act as a community center for other meals. For example, Anne Arundel County serves dinner at 30 of the district's 119 public schools for students who qualify for FARMs. Community schools—which conduct a needs assessment to identify students who lack access to nutritious food—are well positioned to partner with local food banks and other non-profits to provide meals for kids and their families outside of school hours.



According to Feeding America's "Map the Meal Gap 2015" report, Maryland has more than 258,000 children living in food-insecure households, or 19% of all kids in the state.

"You hear about the shootings, but you don't hear about the aftermath. It's like you're killing 10 other people when you kill one. It's just slowly."

- Annette March-Grier, president of Roberta's House, a grief support center in Baltimore City

Adult Education

Of all the ways poverty impairs student learning, one of the most harmful is the association of low-income communities and lack of adult education. A 2009 Institute for Social Research study found that parental education is the strongest aspect of socioeconomic status in predicting a child's educational attainment—with a parent's education level when their child is eight years old being largely predictive of the child's future academic success.

Research shows that greater parental education is associated with adults who provide a more stimulating cognitive and emotional environment in the home, and have a more accurate understanding of their child's achievement. This includes more frequent displays of the importance of education, such as reading, helping with homework, setting expectations for school performance, and attending school-related activities.

Intervention through adult education programming is essential to breaking down these cycles of poverty. As is the case with counseling in schools to manage trauma and meals in schools to prevent hunger, schools are the perfect venue for community adult education classes. Casa de Maryland's "Learning Together" program in collaboration with Prince George's County Public Schools is one such example, where parents are given adult education classes and vocational training—so they can increase their family's income and better support their children's education.

