

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS COME TO WISCONSIN

Unique Model Faces Pandemic Pressures

The community school model – which emphasizes the relationships between schools and the communities they serve – was rapidly expanding nationally and in Wisconsin pre-pandemic and is continuing to grow despite disruptions from COVID-19. Measuring the impact and success of the model is an ongoing challenge, but initial indicators provide insight into some of its strengths and obstacles.

Community schools have garnered significant [national attention](#) and corresponding levels of dedicated resources as policymakers and practitioners seek to improve K-12 schooling. The concept of community schools is not new, but there has been a resurgence of interest in light of its holistic approach and research suggesting that the model can generate long-term [positive benefits in high-poverty schools](#) if supported and implemented effectively. That interest has been especially piqued in reaction to the student needs laid bare and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reviewing available data on the experience of community schools during the pandemic provides an initial look at a model that is lesser known to the general public, spotlighting both its promise and challenges.

AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

The community school model seeks to address barriers to student learning by emphasizing coordinated school-based and community supports (see the text box for a more detailed definition). The model is often implemented in schools eligible for the federal Title I school-wide program, which federal regulations define as schools in which 40% or more of students are economically disadvantaged.

It is also a resource-intensive strategy, with schools and communities typically relying on additional funding to launch and support the staffing and partnerships

required for successful implementation. Community school advocates and practitioners expect the approach to take time and say that traditional forms of school quality measurement may not capture the model's full intended impact, which goes beyond student success measures to encompass student and community health writ large.

The report's lead author, Julia Smucker, is the Wisconsin Policy Forum (WPF) 2021-22 Todd A. Berry Fellow. The fellowship supports a graduate student selected by WPF annually to lead a research project on a state or local policy issue. It was named after Berry, who led the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (a predecessor to WPF) for more than 20 years.

Community Schools Defined

The community school model leverages community assets and partnerships to holistically serve students and their communities, often with the vision of advancing economic and racial equity. While community schools are tailored to the unique needs of their respective communities, the [Learning Policy Institute](#) defines four universal aspects of the model: integrated student supports; expanded learning time and opportunities; family and community engagement; and collaborative leadership and practices. The governance structure of community schools varies, but a common model involves a lead organization, such as a local United Way, that partners with a school district to coordinate resources, such as funding and services from other local organizations. Community schools typically have a full-time coordinator who fosters partnerships with stakeholders and supports the implementation and assessment of the model.

This combination of a large investment of resources, a relatively long timeframe for expected change, and contextualized indicators of success can make the community school model a difficult one for the public to see clearly. Here, we seek to explain the basics of the model and equip readers to follow further developments in its use in the state.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN WISCONSIN

Perhaps by virtue of the many different forms that community schools can take, few definitive statistics exist to describe the number of community schools in the country and in the state. Nationally, estimates range from 5,000 to 10,000 community schools in operation. In Wisconsin, we have identified 34 community schools (see the full list [here](#)) currently operating in Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, Sun Prairie, Green Bay, Appleton, La Crosse, and Oshkosh.

While the community school model may be used in various types of schools, for the purposes of this report we focus on traditional district public schools and specifically the 22 community schools contained within some of the state's largest school districts – Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), Racine Unified School District, and Sun Prairie Area School District – that have been operating since at least 2019.

Funding for community schools may come from a variety of sources. The U.S. Department of Education has emerged as an important source of the additional funds needed to launch and sustain the community school model, most recently through a \$68 million grant program. Some states also play a large role. In one notable example, the California Department of Education recently dedicated \$3 billion over seven years to California Community Schools Partnership Program grants.

Two out of the four highlighted school districts in Wisconsin receive funding for their community school efforts through U.S. Department of Education grants. None of them currently receive state funding dedicated specifically to the model, although they still receive funding through the typical state aid programs available to all public schools. In addition, all four districts have set aside resources for the community school efforts out of these or other general funds.

Table 1 on the following page summarizes the community school programs in Wisconsin that are the focus of this report with respect to funding, partnerships, leadership, and students served. In each district, the model is used as a transformation strategy for schools identified as in need of improvement, and most of the schools serve a majority of students of color from low-income households. Yet each initiative has its own unique organizational structure, and each school aims to tailor its approach to the needs of its community.

Of the four programs, the Milwaukee Community Schools Partnership (MCSP) and Sun Prairie Community Schools have expanded their community school initiatives the most so far. Both have increased the number of schools and students involved and implemented the model beyond the elementary school level. Strong and stable partnerships, funding sources, and leadership appear to be key to their growth thus far.

MCSP is the largest and most established community school initiative in the state. MCSP has grown from four community schools in 2016 to 15 schools serving over 7,000 students in MPS today.

Sun Prairie's first two community schools opened in 2012 with fiscal sponsorship from the YMCA. Funding and leadership hurdles created some difficulties for the initiative in 2014. Since 2016, however, the city and district have partnered to support and expand the initiative. There are now five community schools serving 22% of the district's students, with plans to use the model in three additional schools in the near future. The district identifies potential schools that may benefit from the model by examining students' academic need, poverty rates, school culture, and the existing engagement of families and neighborhood partners.

Community school initiatives in Racine and Madison have been slower to expand. Racine Unified recently opened its third community school. As in Milwaukee, a local United Way – in this case, the United Way of Racine County – is a lead partner with the district and was awarded a [five-year grant of over \\$2.4 million](#) from the U.S. Department of Education in 2020. The initiative, called Link and Inspire for Tomorrow (LIFT), may look to expand in the future, but with the disruption of the pandemic its focus is on supporting and stabilizing currently operating community schools.



MMSD has operated four community schools since 2018. Pre-pandemic, discussions were underway to potentially expand in the 2020-21 school year, but those plans do not currently appear to be moving forward. MMSD generally has fewer supports in place for community schools than the other districts. There is currently no lead organizational partner supporting the

Madison community schools. Instead, the initiative relies on a combination of district support and grants like a Madison Community Foundation challenge grant awarded to the Madison Public Schools Foundation on behalf of MMSD. Several of the initiative's leaders also recently left the district. The lack of stability from

Table 1: Key Components of Community Schools
 Characteristics of community schools in Milwaukee, Racine, Madison, and Sun Prairie

Milwaukee Community Schools Partnership		Link and Inspire for Tomorrow (LIFT)	
Lead Partners	United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA)	Lead Partners	United Way of Racine County Racine Unified School District (RUSD)
Leadership	Director, Milwaukee Community Schools Partnership (United Way) K-5 Community Schools Manager (United Way) K-8 Community Schools Manager (United Way) Community Schools High School Manager (United Way) Community School Leads Team (United Way, MPS, MTEA) Community School Leadership Team at each school	Leadership	Community Schools Director (United Way) Executive Director of Engagement and Equity (RUSD) Community Schools Advisory Board in each school
Connectors	15 Community School Coordinators 10 partner organizations	Connectors	3 Community School Coordinators 4 consortium partner organizations
Students	15 schools (high school, K-5 and K-8) 7,020 students 10.2% of district enrollment	Students	3 schools (K-5 and K-8) 1,841 students 11.1% of district enrollment
Support	U.S. Department of Education grant District and grant funding Community Schools Policy	Support	U.S. Department of Education grant District and grant funding

Madison Metropolitan School District Community Schools		Sun Prairie Community Schools	
Lead Partners	Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD)	Lead Partners	Sun Prairie Area School District (SPASD) City of Sun Prairie
Leadership	Community Schools Manager (MMSD) Community School Committee in each school	Leadership	Community Schools Program Coordinator (SPASD) Community Schools Executive Team Site Leadership Teams at each school
Connectors	4 Community Schools Resource Coordinators	Connectors	5 Community School Coordinators* <i>*Will increase to 6 schools/coordinators in 2022-23</i>
Students	4 schools (K-5 and K-8) 1,519 students 6% of district enrollment	Students	5 schools (K-5, middle school and high school)* 1,843 students 22% of district enrollment
Support	Madison Community Foundation grant District and grant funding	Support	City, district and grant funding



partnerships and long-term leadership could pose a challenge for expansion and sustainability.

While many of these Wisconsin community schools are still young, some of them are approaching the point at which we might expect to be able to measure their impact, given the length of time that it can take the model to take hold. And indeed, both MCSP in Milwaukee and LIFT in Racine have contracted with an external evaluator – in both cases, the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative, housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at UW-Madison’s School of Education – to evaluate their community school initiatives.

The MCSP evaluation, which is in its third year, will review indicators not only of student success and academic achievement, but also of shared leadership, cultural relevance, and equity. These latter metrics are not typical state or district report card measures and may spark further dialogue of how to most fairly measure the model’s impact.

SNAPSHOTS OF PANDEMIC SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Any attempt to capture recent years of community schools in action will have to account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which interrupted data collection and reporting efforts. The pandemic also caused tremendous disruptions to schools and students, particularly among the populations that community schools are most likely to serve – high poverty and, in MPS and Racine, predominantly Black and Hispanic families.

On the one hand, these disruptions may have meant that community schools faced greater challenges than other schools, both by virtue of the disadvantaged communities they serve and because pandemic isolation measures seemed likely to interfere with the typically high-touch model. On the other hand, the model’s emphasis on relationships and resource coordination may have positioned community schools to respond to those difficulties more effectively.

To better understand these specific possible challenges and successes, we used quantitative data and key informant interviews to explore the Wisconsin community school experience during the upheaval of the pandemic.

Our snapshots sought to draw from quantitative metrics related to the school-student-family relationships central to the community school model: chronic absenteeism (students who missed 10% or more of possible attendance days), K4 enrollment, four-year graduation, and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion. We did not consider standardized test indicators due to the low test participation rates during the pandemic, nor did we analyze schools that became community schools during the 2020-21 academic year or later. We also conducted interviews with community school leaders within the selected districts and statewide to inform our analysis and to gain insights that statewide data do not capture.

These snapshots must be considered alongside a myriad of caveats, including the generally small sample size of community schools, the pandemic’s effects on the schools and students and the data tracking them, potential differences between the populations served by community schools and other schools, and variations in the implementation of the model across schools.

As one might expect, therefore, the overall picture that emerges of Wisconsin community schools during the pandemic is neither clear nor definitive and should be interpreted with caution. It does suggest, however, that elementary community schools and their students may face greater challenges than other district schools in recovering from increased chronic absenteeism; that K4 enrollment trends merit further attention over time; that the pandemic did not fully reverse graduation rate gains among community schools operating for at least five years; and that FAFSA completion rates were more vulnerable to decline among community schools.

Furthermore, the pandemic may have impeded the model’s capacity to increase student engagement or deepen long-term work within communities. At the same time, however, the model’s approach may have lent itself well to meeting the short-term needs of the schools’ families during the pandemic. Ultimately, a deeper analysis and longer time horizon will be needed to control for the greater potential challenges faced by community school students and better understand whether the model is responding to them effectively.

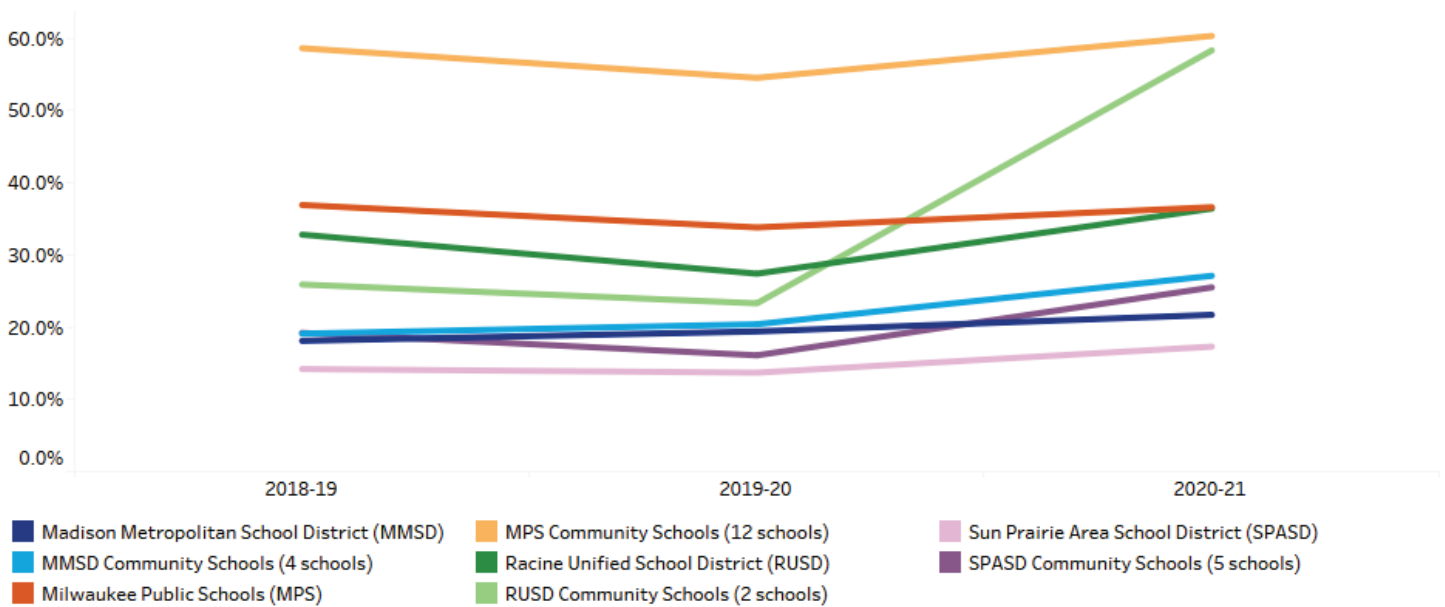
Chronic Absenteeism

In 2019-20, the first year in which the pandemic could have affected attendance figures, the changes in community schools’ absenteeism rates from the



Figure 1: Chronic Absenteeism Rates Briefly Improve Then Rise During the Pandemic

Average district rates and average rates by groupings of community schools*



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *Note: community school averages should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

previous year tended to mirror their respective districts' changes. For Racine, MPS, and Sun Prairie, both the districts' average absenteeism rates and each community school's absenteeism rate declined (see Figure 1). (A decrease in this metric indicates improvement.) Seven out of 12 MCSP schools had larger percentage-point decreases than the district average. All of the Sun Prairie community schools also decreased their absenteeism rates to a greater degree than the district. These figures, however, should be interpreted with great caution. Due to the disruption of the pandemic and virtual schooling, it is unclear how the change in school format or what it meant to be marked "present" at school influenced these data.

In MMSD, the district's chronic absenteeism rate slightly increased by one percentage point (from 18.1% to 19.4%). Three out of the four Madison community schools also saw an increase in chronic absenteeism.

The overall improvements that both districts and community schools reported in 2019-20 largely receded in the following year, however, which was the first full school year after the onset of the pandemic. In general, reported chronic absenteeism rates in community schools rose much more than in their respective districts, by at least twice as many percentage points. These increases could be due to any number of factors, including COVID quarantines, a decline in online engagement in classes that remained virtual,

absenteeism interventions interrupted by the pandemic, and the potentially greater challenges faced by students in community schools.

Interestingly, high schools employing the community school model were an exception to this trend, even though high schools typically have higher absenteeism rates than elementary or middle schools. Three out of five community high schools in MPS continued to see decreased absenteeism rates in 2020-21 despite the pandemic, and four out of five had better rates than the district. The single Sun Prairie community high school, which also functions as an alternative high school, also continued to lower its chronic absenteeism rate in 2020-21. Still, all of these results should be interpreted with caution given the small numbers of schools involved.

K4 Enrollment in Elementary Schools

On average, districtwide K4 enrollment plummeted in MMSD, MPS, and Racine Unified between 2019-20 and 2020-21. (Sun Prairie's community schools do not host K4, so district trends are not examined.) In the 2020-21 school year, MMSD saw a K4 enrollment decline of 18% from the previous year, MPS' K4 enrollment decreased by 19%, and Racine's dropped by 21%. All three districts reduced or partially reversed these losses in 2021-22, although they did not bounce back to 2019-20 levels: Racine increased K4 enrollment by 19%, MPS



increased by 2%, and MMSD decreased by 4% compared to the previous year.

Small sample sizes curtail most meaningful discussion of any individual community school’s K4 enrollment. On the whole, MMSD community schools experienced similar or less dramatic dips in enrollment in 2020-21 and 2021-22 than the district average. Most MPS community schools’ K4 enrollment stayed steadier than the district’s in 2020-21, but 2021-22 brought more variability and an overall decline of 21.7% from the previous year among the MCSP K-5 and K-8 community schools. The two Racine community schools in operation as of 2019 both saw notable declines in K4 enrollment from 2019-20 to 2020-21 but no further drops in 2021-22.

Community school leaders and stakeholders interviewed noted that any dips in K4 enrollment could have been due to K4 being optional, limited internet bandwidth at home only supporting older students’ access, lack of vaccine eligibility and availability for young students, and overall concerns around safety protocols and fear of contracting and bringing home COVID-19.

Graduation and FAFSA Completion in High Schools

Only six community schools examined across the four districts are high schools: five in MPS and one in Sun Prairie. Prairie Phoenix Academy graduates fewer than 50 students per year in Sun Prairie and therefore its data should be interpreted with caution. Still, it is worth noting that the school retained a higher four-year graduation rate in the pandemic years of 2019-20 and 2020-21 than it did in four out of the five preceding years. The same was true for Sun Prairie as a district in 2019-20, while the district’s 2020-21 graduation rate was the median for that seven-year timespan.

Of the five MCSP high schools, three reported decreased four-year graduation rates in 2019-20 compared to the previous year, two of which were larger than the district average’s decline of 2 percentage points: Bradley Technology and Trade High School, with a 19-percentage point drop, and Washington High School of Information Technology, with an 18-percentage point drop. Both of the latter are technical high schools, and it is possible that they suffered more from shifting to a virtual platform when the pandemic hit. Once again, results for just two years and two schools should be interpreted with caution. Both

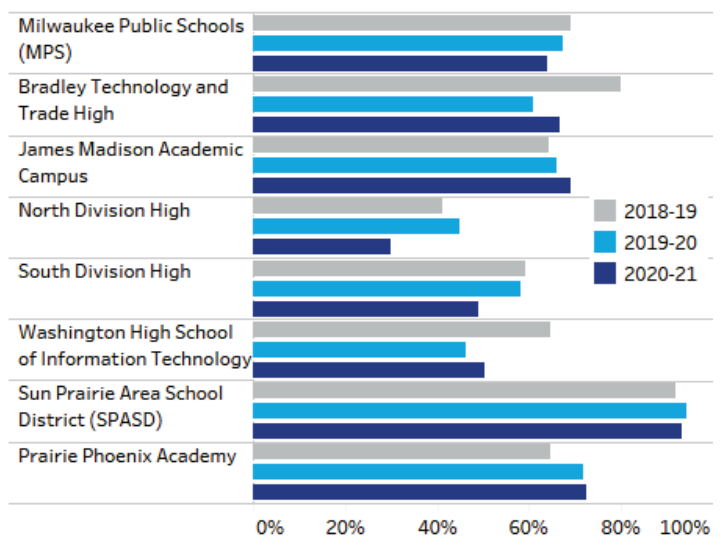
schools saw some improvement in 2020-21, although they did not fully rebound to 2018-19 graduation rates.

Overall, the MPS average graduation rate decreased by 4 percentage points in 2020-21. Three out of five MCSP schools, including Bradley Tech and WHS, bucked this trend by increasing their graduation rates, but two MCSP high schools that had been making steady progress in graduation rates, North Division and South Division, saw losses greater than the district’s average (see Figure 2).

Notably, all three high schools that have used the community school model since 2016 or before – Bradley Tech, James Madison Academic Campus, and Prairie Phoenix – still maintained higher graduation rates during the pandemic than they did five years prior.

Meanwhile, FAFSA completion rates in most MCSP high schools fell in the 2019-20 school year and continued to fall in 2020-21. The sole exceptions still saw at least one year of decline: South Division High School increased from 34.6% to 42.3% in 2019-20 but then declined to 18.8% in 2020-21, and James Madison Academic Campus increased from 58.4% to 64.2% in 2020-21 but only after the school’s previous year drop of 25 percentage points (from 83.4%). As a whole, FAFSA completion rates at MCSP schools fell by more than the district average: a 29.3-percentage point

Figure 2: Graduation Rates Fluctuate During Pandemic
Percentage of cohort receiving regular high school diploma within four years, by graduation year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Note: community school rates should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes and unique school circumstances.



decline from 2018-29 to 2020-21, compared to the district's 15-percentage point decline.

The same caveats apply to this metric as well: The data should be interpreted with caution given that community schools represent a relatively small sample, and their students could have faced greater challenges than others in their district.

Student and Community Engagement

Reflecting on these data and their own experiences, multiple community school leaders noted that COVID destabilized several of the model's key "pillars," including expanded learning time and family engagement. When schools changed to virtual learning, many of the programs at community schools either halted or adjusted to an online format. While an online format could preserve some engagement, enrollment and attendance rates often were lower than for in-person programming, and online programs often did not foster the same sense of connection, according to stakeholders interviewed.

For students, the loss of opportunities to feel a sense of belonging in school or extracurricular activities likely compounded the immediate challenges of COVID-19. For a lengthy period, options for students were limited and direct services interrupted. In some districts, only core partners with clearance were allowed to return to school buildings, while other partner organizations could not offer programming. In other districts, zero outside staff or volunteers were permitted inside buildings.

Also, community schools that opened during or right before the pandemic faced challenges in securing community input into the establishment of long-term goals. These schools typically engage in a year-long planning process grounded in collaboration with stakeholders. However, engaging community stakeholders in strategic planning was difficult during the pandemic and, in at least one leader's experience, plans focused on immediate needs rather than a long-term vision.

Supporting Families

This same shift away from long-term strategies, however, may have allowed community schools to prioritize responding to immediate family challenges such as unemployment and eviction. While the

pandemic exacted a heavy toll on the populations served by community schools, leaders reported that the model by its very design appeared to lend itself well to responding to the unexpected crisis. Partnerships and communication systems already in place put community schools in a good position to respond quickly and effectively to shifting needs both inside and outside the school, like addressing housing instability, conducting family wellness calls, and providing weekend meals.

One district drew upon existing collaborative leadership structures to convene direct service providers, city leaders, and school leaders on the first day of pandemic shutdown, where they drew up a plan for ensuring families' access to basic needs. Community school coordinators could connect families with needed resources thanks to the flexibility of their role and focus on coordination. Local United Ways in all districts, whether they were the lead fiscal partners or not, leveraged resources for communities and funded local nonprofits offering needed services to varying degrees.

Existing communication systems sought to adapt to the pandemic. For example, some community schools were already oriented toward serving their families but shifted practice to prioritize more proactive outreach and direct assistance to communities. A community school leadership team created a system for frequent communication by sending Google Forms each week to families asking what they needed. Many community school leaders noted an increase in parent survey participation, which ran counter to previously low rates of response. Community schools also helped ensure families completed the paperwork necessary to receive stimulus checks and child tax credits, forwarding their goal of connecting families with urgently needed resources.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS?

These snapshots of the community school experience during the pandemic present a mixed and inconclusive picture and may be as useful for illuminating the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations as they are for describing anything unique about community schools. As community schools and their students recover from COVID-19, they may benefit from further examination of their rates of chronic absenteeism, K4 enrollment, graduation, and FAFSA completion over time, in addition to other specific indicators that each community school identifies as critical to its respective



theory of change. It remains to be seen whether the model positions these schools to recover more quickly than others, especially now that the community schools can draw upon in-person relationships more frequently again.

The community school model appears likely to see greater use in the future as districts look to holistic approaches that are focused on families and communities. The Milwaukee Board of School Directors recently passed a community schools policy, standardizing some of the key processes for implementing the model within MPS. Various schools across the state have joined the Wisconsin Coalition for Community Schools and share best practices with each other. Advocates for the model hope that these advances allow for further expansion across the state while establishing and maintaining a high bar for quality.

With any model's expansion comes heightened attention to its effectiveness. Our interviewees highlighted that the pandemic disrupted the metrics that community schools traditionally used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the model to communities, districts, and funders. According to these stakeholders, the disruptions brought to light a discrepancy between what community schools seek to do and how funders in particular have traditionally measured their success. Original grants had included goals of improving specific student outcomes (such as attendance, academics, and behavior), but many community schools value pairing such quantitative data with robust qualitative data, although the latter are more challenging to standardize. Some stakeholders also reported schools comparing the outcomes of students who participate in services and programs to students within the same school who do not participate.

Grant funders have shown greater flexibility in measuring outcomes given the disruption caused by COVID-19. While some of this accommodation could be uniquely tied to the context and timeframe of the pandemic, it may also portend increased willingness in the long term to supplement standard measures of school and student success with other, more holistic or individualized measures.

Policymakers will want to carefully consider this potential trend as well as the emerging data evaluating the effectiveness of community schools both within the

state and nationwide. As previously mentioned, at present there is relatively little publicly available research showing how Wisconsin community schools are faring on a district or state level. We have already noted some of the challenges facing any evaluation effort, including the relatively small number of community schools (particularly in a given district), their particular student bodies and the challenges they face, the variation in approach and implementation across community schools, and the distillation of a complex and multifaceted model to a few indicators of success. The greatest challenge of all to current evaluation efforts may be the disruption of the pandemic on the community school model itself, given its emphasis on expanded learning time and community engagement.

Dialogue on this issue will be critical in the upcoming years as community schools experience a rapid expansion nationwide and investment continues in Wisconsin. Those leading the expansion will need to determine not only how to best capture the impact of the model, but also how to effectively relay findings to the public and incorporate them into future decision-making.

