



Article

Implementing a Systems Approach to Community Schools: A Nested Case Study of the Hamilton County School District and Brainerd High School

Mavis Sanders ^{1,*}, Sarah Klevan ¹ and Summer Hopper ²

¹ Learning Policy Institute, Washington, DC 20036, USA; sklevan@learningpolicyinstitute.org

² Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA; hoppers3@msu.edu

* Correspondence: msanders@learningpolicyinstitute.org

Abstract

School systems across the United States are increasingly adopting the community school strategy to strengthen connections between schools and their surrounding communities and to better address students' academic and nonacademic needs. This nested case study examines implementation in Hamilton County, Tennessee, using the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework to describe both district-level strategy and school-level practice. Focusing on Brainerd High School, a historically significant institution in Chattanooga, the case illustrates how coordinated supports, shared leadership, and community partnerships contribute to school improvement. Findings highlight the potential of the community school strategy to advance educational equity and strengthen school–community collaboration.

Keywords: community schools; school–community partnerships; educational equity; systems change; high school reform

1. Introduction

An increasing number of U.S. school districts¹ have adopted policies and allocated funding to support school–community partnerships, most prominently through the expansion of the community school strategy; also referred to as Full-Service Community Schools (Maier 2025). Approximately 5000 community schools are commonly reported nationwide, and the number continues to grow (Jacobson et al. 2018). This growth is driven in part by substantial federal as well as state-level investments, such as California's large-scale community school initiatives (Swain et al. 2025). The expansion of community schools represents a significant milestone in longstanding efforts to transform schools to better meet the academic, social, and health needs of students, particularly those who have been historically underserved.

As an example of the strategy's transformative potential, this paper examines a community school initiative in Hamilton County, Tennessee, grounded in the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework) (Community Schools Forward 2023). Focusing on both district-level implementation and school-level practice, the study describes how Hamilton County Schools (HCS)—a district that includes Chattanooga—has created conditions for community

Academic Editor: Catherine Hands

Received: 31 March 2026

Revised: 8 July 2026

Accepted: 21 July 2026

Published: 26 July 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

engagement and school revitalization at Brainerd High School. A historic Black institution in the heart of Chattanooga, Brainerd High School once served as a hub of community pride and is now the focus of a collaborative effort to reclaim its legacy through the community school strategy.

The paper proceeds in five sections: (1) a review of the literature on community engagement in schools and the community school strategy; (2) a description of the study's methods; (3) a contextual overview of HCS and Brainerd High School; (4) a presentation of key findings; and (5) a discussion of their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Community Engagement in Schools

Community engagement in schools refers to connections between schools and community members, organizations, and businesses that are established to support the learning and development of the whole child (Chadwick 2003; Hands 2010, 2023; Sanders 2001). These connections include a wide range of activities such as tutoring and mentoring, health and social services, after-school programming, family supports, and partnerships with local businesses and civic organizations. Within this broad set of practices, some initiatives provide direct services to students, while others indirectly support learning by strengthening the conditions in which schools, families, and communities operate (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2006; Hiatt-Michael and Evans 2015; Sanders 2003). Community engagement is not limited by geographic proximity; community partners may include national organizations that provide funding or donate supplies, as well as service agencies located outside the immediate community (Sanders 2001). At the same time, locally based community resources, such as neighborhood recreation centers, libraries, and businesses, may serve a unique protective function by buffering children and youth from risk and supporting healthy development (Rochester et al. 2025).

The literature conceptualizes community engagement in multiple, often overlapping ways. One strand emphasizes school–family–community partnerships focused on coordinating resources and services to support student learning (Sanders 2001). A complementary strand draws on social capital theory to explain how relationships among schools, families, and community organizations facilitate access to information and opportunities that may enhance educational outcomes (Watson et al. 2017). A further strand frames community engagement as a community development strategy that mobilizes local assets and collective capacity to address barriers to learning and promote more equitable outcomes for children and families (Warren and Mapp 2011). Across these perspectives, community engagement is understood not only as a set of programs or services but also as a relational process through which schools and communities work together to support children, youth, and families.

Research spanning more than three decades reports associations between community engagement and a range of outcomes, including student achievement, attendance, behavior, family engagement, and school climate (McAlister 2013). However, findings are heterogeneous and vary across contexts and program designs. Valli et al.'s (2013) typology of school–community partnerships distinguishes four models based on the scope and level of integration between schools and communities: (1) family and interagency collaboration, (2) full-service schools, (3) full-service community schools, and (4) community development models. Family and interagency collaboration focuses on coordinating external services for students and families, typically linking schools with health and social service agencies to reduce barriers to learning. Full-service schools integrate services such as counseling, health care, and social supports within or closely aligned with the school setting. Full-service community schools combine integrated student supports with

expanded learning opportunities, family engagement, and sustained partnerships among schools, families, and community organizations. Community development models position schools as anchors for broader neighborhood improvement efforts by linking education with housing, employment, public safety, and local economic development.

While this typology clarifies variation in scope and complexity, it does not establish a simple hierarchy of effectiveness. More integrated models are frequently hypothesized in the literature to improve outcomes by addressing multiple, interrelated barriers to learning; however, the comparative empirical evidence remains uneven across models and contexts. These approaches are also more complex to implement and evaluate due to their scale, stakeholder diversity, and long-time horizons required for community-level change (Valli et al. 2013).

Indeed, across diverse approaches to community engagement as described by Valli et al. (2013), the literature highlights persistent implementation challenges. Schools often face constraints related to time, funding, and staffing that limit their ability to assess community needs, cultivate and sustain partnerships, coordinate services, and engage in continuous improvement processes (Casto 2016; Hands 2005). Additionally, schools often lack the organizational capacity and sociopolitical understanding needed to effectively navigate the boundaries of race, class, and other forms of structural inequality that shape school–community relationships. Without attending to these broader systems of power (e.g., racism, classism, and sexism), community engagement efforts risk being reduced to service provision and nominal collaboration, rather than achieving their intended transformative goals for students (Daramola et al. 2023; McKinney de Royston and Nasir 2017). In response to these challenges, scholars and practitioners have called for more systematic and institutionalized approaches to school–community collaboration. The community school strategy has emerged as one such approach, providing more formalized structures for coordinating partnerships, integrating supports, building organizational capacity, and aligning community resources with student, family, and school needs.

2.2. *The Community Schools Strategy*

The conceptual foundations of community schools in the United States can be traced to Progressive Era reforms, when settlement houses and school-settlements operated as early place-based efforts to integrate educational, social, and community services (Benson et al. 2009). Settlement houses often centered educational programming, while Southern school-settlements positioned schools as hubs of community development for marginalized groups, including poor Whites, Native Americans, and formerly enslaved African Americans (Lasch-Quinn 1993; Trattner 1998).

In the closing decade of the twentieth century, community schools reemerged as a reform initiative aimed at improving educational opportunities and outcomes for underserved communities (Maier et al. 2018). Their reemergence occurred amid major economic and social shifts widely discussed in 1990s scholarship, including the decline of industrial employment (Dandaneau 1996), the erosion of social capital (e.g., Putnam 1995), and growing concern about youth mental health (e.g., Dryfoos 1991). Organizations such as the Search Institute identified developmental assets that were missing for many children and adolescents (Benson et al. 1999), while school reform programs emphasized the multiple domains of learning and development that exceeded the traditional capacity of most schools (Comer 1999; Melaville and Blank 1991). At the same time, federal funding for expanded out-of-school-time programming increased significantly through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Act (Phillips 2010). In this context, the Coalition for Community Schools began organizing grassroots efforts to address students' and families' needs through coordinated partnerships among schools, families, and community organizations (Dryfoos 1999).

As the current iteration of community schools evolved, researchers and practitioners coalesced around four central pillars of practice: (1) integrated student supports, (2) collaborative leadership and shared governance, (3) expanded and enriched learning opportunities, and (4) family and community engagement (Maier et al. 2017). They also emphasized the need for expanded school staffing to support implementation. In particular, the community school coordinator plays a central role, working closely with the principal to conduct needs and assets assessments; identify and vet community partners; provide professional learning to staff; build trusting relationships with key actors; navigate complex political and policy contexts; and manage the day-to-day responsibilities required for effective community school implementation (FitzGerald and Quiñones 2018; Shiller 2024; Sanders et al. 2019). Through these responsibilities, the community school coordinator helps operationalize the strategy's core pillars of practice.

The community school strategy's theory of change posits that consistent focus on the pillars of practice strengthens conditions for teaching and learning. Specifically, the core practices are intended to foster a positive school climate; empower educators, families, community partners, and students; expand access to resources and supports; and promote more relevant and rigorous learning experiences. In turn, these improved conditions are expected to increase students' social capital and resilience, enhance access to high-quality learning opportunities, and ensure that basic needs are met—leading to improvements in attendance, behavior, academic achievement, and graduation rates. The long-term aim of the strategy is to cultivate college-, career-, and civic-ready students across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Galindo and Sanders 2022).

A growing body of empirical research provides support for these theoretical claims. For example, a recent evaluation of community school implementation in California found positive associations between the strategy and outcomes for diverse K–12 students, including reductions in chronic absenteeism and suspension rates and gains in mathematics and English language arts achievement (Swain et al. 2025). Notably, achievement gains were the largest for historically underserved students, specifically Black students and English learners.

Similarly, a quasi-experimental study examining the effects of the community school strategy on New York City Public School students over three years found positive, statistically significant results across several outcomes. The strategy was associated with increased student attendance at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in all three years. The study also found positive and significant effects on on-time grade progression for elementary and middle school students in the two years for which data were available, as well as improved graduation rates for high school students in two of the three years examined. In addition, there was evidence of reduced disciplinary incidents among elementary and middle school students, and a significant positive effect on high school students' credit accumulation in all three years of the study (Johnston et al. 2020).

A growing body of qualitative case studies (e.g., Adams 2020; Hernández et al. 2025) complements large-scale quantitative studies and deepens understanding of the systems-level conditions that support effective community school implementation. These include district investment, professional development for community school coordinators, and the prioritization of rigorous and expanded learning opportunities. Other qualitative research critically examines how systemic bias can shape community school implementation, leading to inequities in experiences and outcomes for specific student and family groups (e.g., Baxley 2024; Galindo et al. 2017; McKinney de Royston and Madkins 2020). This growing body of knowledge, together with historic federal and state investments in community schools (Maier 2025; Okogbue et al. 2022), underscores the need for an expanded community schools framework that ensures equitable and effective implementation and fosters the “in-school conditions characteristic of high-performing schools”

(Maier et al. 2017, p. viii). Such a framework must explicitly account for the systems-level structures and processes required for scaling both implementation and impact.

2.3. *Scaling the Community School Strategy: Community Schools Forward*

Coburn (2003) and others (Fullan 2004; Sanders 2012) have highlighted the importance of a systems approach to education reform for achieving scale. Coburn (2003) specifies four interrelated dimensions of scale:

- Depth: Understanding key reform principles well enough to effect meaningful changes in professional beliefs and practices.
- Spread: Expanding the reform from a few initial sites to broader implementation.
- Ownership: Ensuring local ownership of the reform—which is particularly significant for place-based initiatives like community schools.
- Sustainability: Maintaining key reform elements over time.

Achieving these dimensions of scale requires an infrastructure of support that enables key actors to implement reforms with fidelity while fostering continuous improvement. By coordinating resources, expectations, and practices across all levels of the education system, a systems approach brings coherence to the often frenetic and fragmented landscape of education reform (Quinn and Fullan 2017).

In 2022, recognizing the need for a framework to guide systems-level implementation of community schools, the Learning Policy Institute, the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, the Children’s Aid National Center for Community Schools, and the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership launched a national collaborative called Community Schools Forward. This two-year effort brought together researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to develop resources to guide systems-level adoption of community schools (Learning Policy Institute n.d.).

These resources include:

- The Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework)
- An updated theory of action², and
- A description of outcomes and indicators.³

The CSF Framework provides a visual depiction of the essential elements of a fully implemented community school, illustrating their integrated nature. Importantly, it expands the four pillars of practice to six. The inclusion of “a culture of safety, belonging, and care” and “rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction” further anchors the strategy in the literature on equitable, high-performing schools. Additionally, the CSF Framework specifies six areas of the supportive infrastructure (e.g., data systems, shared government structures) and four enabling conditions at the district and school levels (e.g., trusting relationships, shared vision) associated with effective community school implementation (see Figure 1).

Since the release of the CSF Framework, multiple districts across the United States have adopted it to launch or expand community school efforts including several in the state of California (Hernández et al. 2025). Hamilton County Schools (HCS) adopted the CSF Framework as part of its community school initiative in 2023. This study examines the district’s implementation, with a particular focus on Brainerd High School as a focal site for understanding how systems-level strategies influence school-level practice.



Figure 1. Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework.

3. Methodology

This study of Hamilton County Schools (HCS) and Brainerd High School is part of a larger multi-site investigation examining a systems-based approach to implementing the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework). The other study sites are in Greece, New York, and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Within HCS, the study includes two focal schools: Brainerd High School and Orchard Knob Elementary School. Future reports will present a single-case analysis of Orchard Knob Elementary School, cross-case analyses of Brainerd High School and Orchard Knob Elementary School, and comparative analyses across all three study sites. This article focuses specifically on Brainerd High School and describes:

- The supporting HCS infrastructure
- Community school implementation using the CSF Framework
- Student and family experiences and outcomes

The sections that follow describe researcher positionality, study design, site selection, and data collection and analysis.

3.1. Positionality Statement

The researchers and authors of this study are three women—one Black and two White—with varied regional backgrounds, including the first author’s deep roots in the South, as well as diverse professional and research experiences. All have taught in K–12 schools: the first author as a secondary social studies teacher, the second as an elementary school teacher, and the third as a secondary mathematics teacher. The first two authors also have extensive research experience using a constructivist lens to understand education reform, particularly whole-child approaches to school transformation, from the perspectives of those engaged in the work. The third author is in the final stage of a doctoral program focused on K–12 education policy.

Participants were generally receptive to engaging with the research team given the study’s focus on understanding and documenting well-established implementation of the

CSF Framework. We sought to honor this trust through a commitment to accurately represent what we learned and observed. Throughout the study, we engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue, drawing on our diverse backgrounds and experiences to question our assumptions, examine methodological decisions, and critically consider emergent findings during weekly research meetings and across the research process. In this way, we sought to leverage the benefits—and mitigate the limitations—of our positions as external researchers without personal ties to the site, yet with substantial background knowledge and extensive access to key reform actors.

3.2. Research Design

To achieve the study's objectives, investigators employed a nested (or embedded) case study design. Case studies allow researchers to remain sensitive to context while capturing multiple processes and data sources (Stake 2005; Yin 2018). As such, they are well suited for examining the complex ways educational reforms unfold in local settings. A nested case study approach enables researchers to examine broader phenomena, explore the systems and subunits that influence them, identify patterns across these units, and investigate dynamics within the case (Grenier 2023).

This study was designed to examine an exemplary community school system as a case of effective systems-level implementation of the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework). HCS was purposefully selected because it had established districtwide structures aligned with the CSF Framework and demonstrated sustained implementation over multiple years. Rather than seeking to evaluate program effectiveness or identify implementation constraints, the purpose of the study was to understand how a district and school with relatively mature implementation organized resources, partnerships, and governance structures to support community school transformation. Consistent with the logic of exemplary case study research (Flyvbjerg 2006; Mills et al. 2010), the goal was to identify promising practices, lessons learned, and ongoing improvement efforts that may inform implementation in other contexts.

HCS served as the overarching unit of analysis, while Brainerd High School functioned as a nested subunit. This design enabled a holistic examination of how district- and school-level structures, supports, and governance practices shaped community school implementation and sustainability. It also allowed researchers to investigate how systems-level conditions were experienced and enacted within a school recognized by participants as undergoing positive transformation. While the study attended to challenges and constraints when they emerged, its primary focus was understanding the conditions, processes, and organizational supports associated with sustained implementation of the CSF Framework in a mature community school context.

3.3. District and Focal School Site Selection

Site selection occurred in two stages. First, districts were identified from those currently implementing the community school strategy using the CSF Framework and receiving technical assistance from the National Center for Community Schools. From this group, a subset of districts representing geographic and demographic diversity was selected for preliminary “scouting reports” to better understand their systemic capacity and infrastructure for community school implementation as well as their progress to date.

Based on this preliminary review, HCS was selected for the study. The district was chosen because it demonstrated several features relevant to the study's focus on systems-level implementation, including long-standing leadership for the community schools initiative (with a district coordinator serving in the role for more than eight years); alignment with the Community Schools Forward mission, values, and key practices; established structures that support collaborative decision-making; multiple years of partnership with

the National Center for Community Schools; and evidence of adopting and adapting the CSF Framework within district practice.

The second stage of site selection involved identifying focal schools within the district that demonstrated strong community school implementation. HCS includes 19 community schools. To select two schools for in-depth study, three initial criteria were applied reflecting sustainability, academic progress, and equity. Specifically, schools were required to (a) have implemented the community schools strategy for at least two years with a full-time community school coordinator, (b) have an overall achievement level of two or higher on the state's five-point accountability scale, and (c) have a score of three or higher (out of five) on the state's Growth for Highest Need Students indicator.

Based on these criteria, five schools were invited to participate in brief informational interviews to assess additional indicators of CSF Framework implementation. All but one school agreed to participate in an interview, which was conducted with the principal and, in some cases, the community school coordinator. Using information from these interviews, schools were rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (planning stage) to 4 (well-established implementation) for each of the CSF Framework's six practices. The two schools receiving the highest implementation scores—Brainerd High School and Orchard Knob Elementary School—were selected as focal cases.

Brainerd High School, the focus of this paper, was selected because it demonstrated established implementation aligned with the study's selection criteria, and reported extensive collaboration with Chattanooga City government, HCS staff, and community partners. It also had stable leadership, with both the executive principal and community school coordinator serving multiple years in their roles. In addition, Brainerd demonstrated well-established implementation of several CSF Framework key practices, including expanded learning opportunities, improvements in school culture, and integrated systems of support for students and families. District data further indicated improvements in student outcomes following adoption of the CSF Framework, including increased graduation rates, decreased suspension rates, and academic growth among its highest need students (Tennessee Department of Education 2025). Table 1 provides student body demographics for both HCS and Brainerd High School. Additionally, Table 2 presents student outcomes over time for HCS high schools and Brainerd High School.

Table 1. Student demographics for HCS and Brainerd High School in the 2024–2025 school year.

	Hamilton County Schools	Brainerd High School
Black or African American	29%	73%
Hispanic or Latino/a	22%	22%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	<10 students
Asian	3%	<10 students
White	45%	<5%
Economically disadvantaged	32%	64%
English learners	14%	16%
Students experiencing homelessness	3%	7%
Foster youth	<1%	<5%
Students with disabilities	15%	16%
Migrant	<1%	<10 students
Military-connected students	<1%	<10 students
Out-of-school suspension	21%	9%
Enrollment	44,855	739

Source: TN Public Schools: Hamilton County: About this District. Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.). <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/district/00330> (accessed on 1 March 2026).

Table 2. A comparison of student outcomes in HCS high schools and Brainerd High School, 2019–2025.

Student Outcome		2019 ^a	2022 ^a	2023 ^a	2024 ^a	2025 ^a	Change in Percentage Points Between Most Recent Data and Prior Average
Chronic Absenteeism	HCS HS	24%	35%	33%	32%	28%	−3%
	Brainerd	51%	60%	53%	51%	43%	−11%
Graduation Rates	HCS HS	86%	87%	89%	94%	unav ^c	7%
	Brainerd	69%	76%	78%	77%	unav ^c	3%
Out-of School Suspension	HCS HS	9%	8%	7%	11%	7%	−2%
	Brainerd	28%	17%	9%	13%	9%	−8%
Academic Achievement ^b	HCS HS	27%	24%	35%	35%	35%	5%
	Brainerd	7%	6%	15%	6%	10%	2%

Notes: ^a Years indicate the report card in which the data was reported. ^b Academic achievement is the Federal Success Rate, calculated by the percentage of students who met or exceeded expectations on state tests in both Mathematics and ELA. ^c Report cards are scored using data from the school year for some metrics, and lagged data for others. These indicators do not use lagged data and are not yet available for the 2025 report card. Source: TN Public Schools: 2025 Performance Metrics. Tennessee Department of Education. <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/district/00330> (accessed on 1 March 2026).

3.4. Data Collection

Data for the case study were collected from September 2025 to February 2026. Primary data sources for this study include interviews, focus groups, observations, and relevant documents from HCS and Brainerd High School.

3.4.1. Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews were conducted using a multi-stage, structured data collection approach. The initial wave of interviewees was selected through purposive sampling to include key actors across HCS departments, lead agencies, and community organizations. This list was then reviewed by the HCS Director of Community Impact and Partnership, who provided feedback and recommended additional participants.

The systems-level phase included interviews with 15 stakeholders across three lead agencies, five positions at HCS, and three community partners (see Table 3). Each interviewee was asked to speak to the organization’s history and connection to community schools, role in supporting local community schools, and the challenges and successes it has faced in developing and sustaining community schools. Interview prompts also asked participants to describe the systems and structures used to facilitate inter-agency collaboration and strong site-based implementation.

After these systems-level interviews, researchers interviewed the community school coordinator and principal at the focal schools to understand their experiences, roles in implementing the approach, and their strategies to advance community school priorities. Interview prompts asked community school coordinators to describe aspects of the community school strategy at their site, as well as their roles and responsibilities in its implementation. Coordinators and principals also reflected on the ways they collaborated with each other, families, and educators, as well as how district or lead agency structures supported them to engage in their daily work. Upon completing interviews with community school coordinators and principals, researchers used both purposive and snowball sampling to identify site-based personnel to offer additional perspectives on community school implementation at the school and the ways in which community school strategies

influenced students, families, and educators. At Brainerd High School, this resulted in two interviews and six focus groups, which included school staff, students' families, and alumni. Participants were asked to describe community school implementation at Brainerd High School and to reflect on their experiences with the community school strategy. See Table 3 for details on interview and focus group participants for this study.

Both systems- and school-level interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and lasted 30–60 min. In most instances, study participants were interviewed once, but the community school coordinators, principals, and HCS Director of Community Impact and Partnership were interviewed multiple times given their leadership in community school efforts. In one instance, two participants were interviewed simultaneously, at their request, for convenience. Systems-level interviews, two interviews with Brainerd High School's executive principal, and two interviews with the community school coordinator were conducted virtually via Zoom. Researchers also conducted eight in-person interviews and focus groups at Brainerd High School with select participants during a three-day site visit in November 2025 (see Table 3). Each interview was audio recorded, with permission from participants, and transcribed. Virtual sessions generated automated transcripts, while in-person sessions were transcribed using the Microsoft Word Transcribe tool. All transcripts were checked for accuracy prior to data analysis.

Table 3. Systems-level and Brainerd High School interview and focus group participants.

Role	Total Number of Interviews	Total Number of Participants	Level/School
<i>Interviews</i>			
District and Initiative Leaders	7 interviews	5 people	Systems-level
Lead Agencies	4 interviews	4 people	Systems-level
Community Partners	3 interviews	4 people	Systems-level
<i>Systems-level Total</i>	<i>14 interviews</i>	<i>13 people</i>	
Executive Principal	2 interviews	1 person	Brainerd High School
Community School Coordinator	2 interviews	1 person	Brainerd High School
Other Site-based Personnel	1 interview	1 person	Brainerd High School
Community Member	1 interview	1 person	Brainerd High School
<i>Focus Groups</i>			
Teachers	1 group	5 participants	Brainerd High School
Families	1 group	4 participants	Brainerd High School
Students	2 groups	3 and 4 participants	Brainerd High School
Alumni	1 group	5 participants	Brainerd High School
Student Success Planning Team ^a	1 group	6 participants	Brainerd High School
<i>Brainerd High School Total</i>	<i>12 interviews and focus groups</i>	<i>31 people</i>	
<i>Combined Total</i>	<i>26 interviews and focus groups</i>	<i>44 people</i>	

Notes: ^a The Student Success Planning Team is a school leadership team at Brainerd High School.

3.4.2. Observations

Researchers also conducted observations at Brainerd High School to triangulate interview and focus group data. During the site visit, researchers observed day-to-day operations at Brainerd High School as well as systems-level support for HCS community schools. At Brainerd High School, researchers observed classroom instruction, advisory board meetings for curriculum pathways, and a family Thanksgiving event. Investigators also shadowed Brainerd High School's community school coordinator to gain insights into her daily activities, including a monthly coordinators' meeting hosted by the city of Chattanooga, the Lead Agency for Brainerd High School, and how she engaged with school actors to promote community schooling in everyday exchanges. Investigators also

observed an HCS Community Impact and Partnership meeting, during which the director and coordinators of strategic partnerships, family and community engagement, and school-based student support teams updated the deputy superintendent on progress toward districtwide goals. Observations were documented using open-ended field notes as well as structured Excel-based tools designed to capture aspects of the CSF Framework such as systems-level infrastructure, key practices, and enabling conditions.

3.5. Documents

The research team collected and reviewed 10 organizational documents related to community school implementation, and how community partners engage with HCS and schools in the district. These included meeting agendas, classroom handouts, memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between HCS and lead partners, and other related documents. In addition to these documents, the research team accessed publicly available data on student demographics and outcomes.

Data Analysis

Investigators used a multistep process of coding and memoing to analyze data. First, all researchers involved in the broader research study collaboratively created a preliminary list of descriptive and deductive codes based on the relevant literature, the study's research objectives, and the CSF Framework. Through an iterative process of review, the full research team refined the code list—clarifying definitions and adding or removing codes—to ensure that key concepts were represented in the codebook and to minimize redundancy (see Table 4).

Table 4. Codes used during the analysis process.

Parent Code	Child Code
Challenges	N/A
Community Schools (CS) Key Practices	Collaborative Leadership, Power, and Voice
	Culture of Belonging, Safety, and Care
	Expanded and Enriched Learning Opportunities
	Family and Community Engagement
	Integrated Systems of Support
	Rigorous Community-Connected Classroom Instruction
	Student Engagement and Leadership
	Other
CS History and Growth	N/A
CS Mission	N/A
Enabling Conditions	Actionable Data
	Inclusive Decision-Making
	Shared Vision
	Trusting Relationships
Outcomes	Academic Achievement/Attainment
	Access to Services and Programs
	Attendance and Absenteeism
	Climate and Discipline
	Family Engagement
	College and Career Readiness
Other	Early Learning
	Student self-actualization and pride
School Staffing	Community School Coordinator

	Principal Teachers
Sociopolitical Context	N/A
Successes	N/A
School and Neighborhood Environment	N/A
Systematic Infrastructure	Continuous Improvement
	Data Systems
	Funding
	Lead Agency
	Aligned Strategy
	PD
	Policy
	Shared Governance
	Strategic Partnerships
	Sustainability

After refining the codebook, individual case teams engaged in a norming process to ensure consistent application of codes among team members. All team members coded copies of the same transcripts and convened to compare their code applications and discuss any inconsistencies. Once group coding norms were established, the research team uploaded and coded the interview and focus group data using Dedoose, a web-based application for qualitative analysis. A member of the research team applied the codes to each transcript as the primary coder. Then, a second team member completed secondary coding by reviewing all codes applied by the first member, adding additional relevant codes, and making a note of any discrepancies to discuss during weekly team meetings. Researchers used the memo feature in Dedoose to make connections across interviews and highlight emerging themes.

When qualitative coding was completed, researchers analyzed code frequencies and identified patterns within and across cases. Researchers then reviewed observational field notes and documents and manually coded them using the same thematic codes applied to the interview data. These themes were then organized according to the study’s research objectives. To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted with the Director of Community Impact and Partnership as well as quoted participants (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Morse 2015).

4. Site Descriptions

4.1. Hamilton County Schools

Hamilton County Schools (HCS) is a large public school district located in southeastern Tennessee. The district serves students across approximately 542 square miles, encompassing rural, suburban, and urban communities within Hamilton County, including eleven municipalities operating under a unified county school system. Notably, the once-separate Chattanooga City Schools district was merged into HCS in 1997, following a 1995 citywide referendum (Bradley 1996).

In the 2024–2025 school year (SY), HCS served approximately 46,000 students across 82 schools, providing education from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, with an annual operating budget exceeding \$600 million (Institute of Education Sciences [IES] n.d.). As shown in Table 1, the district serves a diverse student population. In SY 2024–25, White students comprised the largest racial/ethnic group (45%), approximately one-third of students were identified as economically disadvantaged, 14% of students were classified as English learners, and 15% were identified as students with disabilities.

HCS is organized into five geographically defined Learning Communities: Rock Point, Harrison Bay, North River, Missionary Ridge, and Midtown—which includes schools located in the central area of Hamilton County and covers much of the city of Chattanooga. These regional learning communities are intended to facilitate localized leadership, cross-school collaboration, and coordinated resource allocation.

The district's stated mission, as noted on its website, is to equip students with the "knowledge, skills, and supports necessary to thrive in life." As part of this effort, the district adopted the community school strategy in partnership with lead agencies that are responsible for:

- Hiring and supervising full-time community school coordinators⁴ at each of their assigned schools.
- Funding community school coordinator salaries and the programmatic needs of the community schools.
- Implementing unique services and supports aligned with the community school strategy.

While lead agencies hold these responsibilities, community schools in the district are supported through a dual-capacity structure between the lead agency and HCS.

The district currently works with three lead agencies. HCS launched its community school initiative in 2017 with five schools, partnering with Northside Neighborhood House as a lead agency; by SY 2024–25, this partnership had expanded to 10 schools. In 2019, a second lead agency, On Point, began providing a community school coordinator at Dalewood Middle School. In 2021, a third lead agency, the city of Chattanooga, partnered with HCS to fund full-time community school coordinators at eight schools in the Midtown Learning Community (Hamilton County Schools n.d.).

Since the 2023–2024 SY, HCS has been receiving technical assistance from the National Center for Community Schools and has increasingly engaged with the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework). The community school strategy is housed in the district's Office of Community Impact and Partnership, under the leadership of Dr. Caitlyne Steward, Director of Community Impact and Partnership, who reports to the Deputy Superintendent of Hamilton County Schools. Dr. Steward also serves as Vice Chair of the Tennessee Community Schools State Network—a collaborative of community school providers, school administrators, advocates, and community partners focused on sharing best practices, professional development, legislative advocacy, and evaluation.

Reflecting on the district's progress since adopting the CSF Framework and initiating its broader emphasis on community engagement, Dr. Steward described the development of clearer pathways for civic participation and partnership. She also noted improvements in student outcomes at several community schools, including reductions in absenteeism and disciplinary incidents, attributing these gains to strengthened cross-sector partnerships, expanded family engagement structures, and more coordinated systems of support. When discussing attendance and behavior specifically, she observed, "If you look at Brainerd's data and some of our other schools, it's honestly really amazing."

4.2. Brainerd High School

Brainerd High School was established in 1960 as an all-White public school. As additional Black families moved into nearby areas, they sought access to the quality public education offered at the school. Beginning in 1967, Black students enrolled in increasing numbers under federal desegregation orders, and Brainerd High School developed a diverse student body more rapidly than many other high schools in Chattanooga (Spikes 2026). The school's transition occurred amid a highly charged social environment. Its

nickname, the Rebels, the fight song “Dixie,” and the prominent display of the Rebel flag fueled racial tensions that peaked in SY 1969–70 with disturbances between Black and White students and eventually led to a lawsuit (Shearer 2025). In *Melton v. Young*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit upheld the authority of school officials to prohibit the display of a Confederate flag on a student’s clothing, applying the substantial disruption standard because of Brainerd High School’s recent history of racial tension (Hudson 2009). This ruling affirmed the principal’s authority to restrict Confederate symbols and continues to serve as a precedent for bans on such symbols in public schools today.

Within a few years, Brainerd High School became a predominantly Black school and adopted the Panther as its new mascot in 1981. During the 1980s and 1990s, the school achieved notable success in athletics, including multiple state championships in boys’ basketball and boys’ and girls’ track and field, and gained national attention when Venus Lacy, an alumna, won Olympic gold in women’s basketball in 1996. By the turn of the millennium, however, broader social and economic shifts affecting the Brainerd community, and many Black communities throughout the United States (Lloyd et al. 2024), presented increased challenges to student achievement and behavior (Shearer 2019).

Today, Brainerd High School is working to address these challenges as part of the Midtown Learning Community, led by Community Superintendent, Dr. Tiffany Earvin. As shown in Table 1, in SY 2024–25, the school enrolled 739 students in grades 9–12. In contrast to HCS overall, Brainerd served a predominantly Black (73%) and Hispanic (22%) student population during the same year. Nearly two-thirds of students (64%) were classified as economically disadvantaged, 16% were identified as students with disabilities, 16% were English learners, and 7% were identified as experiencing homelessness.

Brainerd is designated as a “Priority School” by the Tennessee Department of Education, a classification assigned to schools with academic performance in the bottom 5% statewide or with a graduation rate below 67%. The school is working diligently to increase achievement on state standardized assessments and other performance indicators, reflecting a broader commitment to educational equity and student success. Notably, in SY 2024–25, Brainerd earned a 3 out of 5 score—meeting state expectations for academic growth among its highest need students.⁵

In 2021, Brainerd High School became a community school, partnering with the city of Chattanooga as its lead agency. This transition coincided with the appointment of Dr. Crystal Sorrells as executive principal. A Brainerd High School alumna who is well known in the community and whose father previously served as the school’s head football coach, Dr. Sorrells has served as executive principal for four years and previously served as assistant principal from 2009 to 2021. She leads an administrative team that includes three assistant principals. The community school coordinator—an employee of the city of Chattanooga—is also a Brainerd alumna and was a student while Dr. Sorrells served as assistant principal at the school.

Since becoming a community school in 2021, Brainerd High School’s graduation rate has increased by eight percentage points from its’ pre-pandemic graduation rate, despite the documented effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on academic achievement and other student outcomes, particularly among historically underserved students (Jack and Oster 2023). The school’s chronic absenteeism rate has declined by 11 percentage points, and student behavior indicators have also improved, with out-of-school suspensions decreasing by eight percentage points (see Table 2).

While celebrating these gains, school leaders acknowledge the ongoing work required to achieve their goals for student success. They also recognize that these ambitions cannot be realized without strong community partnerships. Describing the school’s community-engaged approach, the executive principal explained that Brainerd High School is striving to be:

The hub of all things needed for our students, for our staff members, for our parents, for our community, for our feeder pattern. There's a lot of movement and momentum around our building—all hours on weekends, after school, before school. A lot of resources here and connections to resources to make sure everyone has everything that they could possibly need to be successful and to feel comfortable and to be safe attending school, being at school, and ultimately graduating.

This study sought to better understand the 'how' behind HCS's and Brainerd High School's efforts; the key findings are presented below.

5. Findings

5.1. *The Supporting HCS Infrastructure*

The work involved in creating and sustaining community schools goes beyond what schools can do on their own—districts hold a significant role in supporting and scaling community school implementation. As shown in Figure 1, the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework) identifies six key areas of supportive infrastructure that strengthen whole-child aligned practices at the school-level: strategic partnerships, sustainable resources, shared governance structures, professional learning opportunities, data systems, and continuous improvement. Despite the relatively recent adoption of the CSF Framework in 2023–24, HCS has made meaningful progress in building supportive infrastructure across each of these areas, with varying levels of maturity and development. This section examines HCS' efforts to develop supportive infrastructure aligned with the CSF Framework, with particular attention to the systems-level supports that have directly shaped community school transformation at Brainerd High School.

The elements of supportive infrastructure outlined in the CSF Framework are not isolated components, but rather interconnected and mutually reinforcing parts of a cohesive whole. As such, the findings related to HCS's supportive infrastructure are presented in a way that captures this integration and highlights the collective impact of this systems-level support. In addition to illustrating the supportive infrastructure in place, this section describes enabling conditions, in place at the district and school levels, which further supported community school implementation (see Figure 1).

5.1.1. Strategic Partnerships, Sustainable Resources, and Shared Governance Structures

Strategic partnerships refer to intentional, systems-level relationships between a district and external organizations, such as county agencies and community-based organizations. These relationships are formalized through MOUs and data-sharing agreements and coordinated at the district level to strengthen and sustain community school implementation and advance the goals of the strategic plan, Opportunity 2030.⁶ At the core of HCS's community school initiative are its partnerships with the three lead agencies. As new agencies joined the initiative, common challenges associated with cross-sector collaboration emerged, including ambiguity regarding roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority. District and city leaders reported that the partners' capacity to navigate these tensions was enabled by a shared commitment to dismantling inequitable systems and a belief that improving outcomes for children is a collective community responsibility rather than solely a function of the school system. As the HCS Director of Community Impact and Partnership explained:

Being a Chattanooga and living in Hamilton County means we take care of our own. As a district, we consistently ask how partnerships at the systems and

hyper-local levels can expand access, reduce barriers, and create the conditions for more kids to thrive.

The city of Chattanooga serves as the lead agency for schools in the Midtown Learning Community, including Brainerd High School. As a lead agency, the city works closely with HCS on community school planning and implementation, a collaboration that reflects a shared commitment to inclusive decision-making and governance across both organizations.

A primary aim of the partnership between the city and HCS is to improve access to city services and resources for students and families. A city administrator in the Department of Early Learning explained:

They [community school coordinators] are city employees. So, if they don't know [how to access a resource], then they come to me and say, "Hey, this is what I got going on. Who do we need to call?" And if I know the name of a person, I shoot them that name. If not, I reach out to the administrator of the department... and say, "Hey, who handles this in your department?" And then connect them. There's a plethora of resources that we have.

Community school coordinators similarly reported that proximity to city resources facilitated implementation by alleviating challenges associated with resource constraints. As Brainerd High School's coordinator explained, "Being with the city of Chattanooga gives you just a little bit more flexibility... as far as what you're able to do."

District officials value lead agencies as a critical sustainability strategy, particularly for their role in employing and funding community school coordinator salaries. Beyond individual salaries, these partnerships also strengthen long-term financial stability by consolidating diverse funding streams from multiple stakeholders, reducing dependence on any single funder. The Chief Strategy Officer for Hamilton County Schools explained it this way, "When you think about sustainability, it's finding additional partners, right? Partners that are willing to understand what this work is and take it on and be a great partner."

The sustainability of community schools in HCS is also supported by Tennessee's strategic funding model, Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA), which increases discretionary funding for high-need schools. Implemented in the 2023–24 SY, the TISA funding formula provides base level funding for every public school student plus additional weighted funding for students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, and those in rural schools. The superintendent explained how the new funding model supports the community school initiative in HCS:

Most of our Community Forward schools have a high number of kids that are living in poverty and a higher percentage of kids that are newly proficient or not proficient. So, they're getting additional resources and they can work with their leadership teams on how to invest those funds. So, you see a lot of Community Forward schools that, of course, they've got the coordinator, but they may be investing in a family partnership specialist, in additional tutors to stay after school to provide educational support, or an added social worker... Part of the sustainability aspect of it is setting up our school funding model to recognize that, based on student need, additional resources are required to remove barriers for kids to succeed.

At Brainerd High School, these funds have supported several positions including a social worker, truancy specialist, two counselors, a student support coach, and a school nurse. These roles are integral to the school's Student Success Planning (SSP) team, which systematically connects students and families with needed resources. (The SSP team is described in greater depth in Section 5.2.5).

HCS is also engaged with inter-agency shared governance structures that support the sustainability of its community school initiative. Chief among these is the Children's Cabinet, a cross-sector leadership body convened by Chattanooga 2.0, a local nonprofit, that brings together the city's highest-level decision-makers to address shared priorities for children and families. The Cabinet exemplifies inclusive decision-making in its membership, which spans government and community agencies. Co-chaired by the city mayor, county mayor, and HCS superintendent, it also includes the deputy superintendent and chief of strategy for HCS, the sheriff, chief of police, city policy director, and representatives from mental health, housing, and transportation agencies. Chattanooga 2.0 not only convenes the Cabinet but also secures funding to act on its priorities. Together, Cabinet members have leveraged their collective authority to expand access to critical resources for HCS families such as securing no-cost high-speed internet for families across the district, a benefit that directly supports students at Brainerd High School.

HCS's participation in the Children's Cabinet illustrates how shared governance can reduce implementation barriers and support the sustainability of community schools by strengthening political commitment and high-level support, mobilizing cross-sector resources, and diversifying funding streams.

5.1.2. Professional Learning, Data Systems, and Continuous Improvement

Adopting a community school approach broadens the expectations of what schools are expected to do, giving rise to new processes, structures, and work streams. In HCS, many of these responsibilities are managed by community school coordinators, relatively new roles that require ongoing professional learning. To support coordinators, HCS and lead agencies have established several dedicated learning structures. Primary among these are professional learning opportunities provided by lead agencies for their coordinators.

For example, the city of Chattanooga brings all city community school coordinators together on a weekly basis. In describing these weekly sessions, the Community Forward Program Director, Jacqueline Thomas, emphasized their supportive, collaborative nature—serving as a dedicated space for community school coordinators to share updates, surface concerns, work through challenges, and learn more about city and community services and programs. Brainerd High School's community school coordinator described the sessions as a useful opportunity to identify resources needed for her school. As she explained, "It's the power of those Wednesday meetings when I'm with my team. If I don't know something [needed by] the school, I tell them, give me until Wednesday so I can meet with my team. And I take it to the table. And then between us, we'll get it figured out there."

In a session observed by the research team, coordinators opened with a "Roses and Thorns" activity that surfaced both promising school-community initiatives and shared challenges. During this activity, the Brainerd High School community school coordinator shared a successful partnership she formed to install bike racks at the school. She also shared a challenge around providing student transportation to the local food bank, utilizing the group to brainstorm potential solutions. This activity was followed by a presentation from a local business which featured employment and volunteer opportunities, prompting coordinators to explore how the company could benefit their school communities through job fairs, interview preparation support, and donations. The meeting also included guidance on connecting families to holiday resources through faith-based partners and local food banks. The session illustrated the benefits of a professional community that allowed community school coordinators to learn from their peers, share best practices, and gain exposure to community organizations that could support their schools.

In addition to professional learning provided by lead agencies, HCS brings community school coordinators across all agencies together monthly for structured learning opportunities. These sessions ground coordinators in the CSF Framework, build community among peers, and include school site visits to observe each other's approaches in practice, promoting cross-site collaboration and professional growth. Additionally, these sessions support coordinators to engage with actionable data to assess their school needs.

HCS also hosts summer learning convenings for community school coordinators and principals, co-designed by district staff and lead agencies. These sessions are grounded in the CSF Framework, with a particular emphasis on helping staff integrate community school strategies and practices into existing school structures rather than approaching them as added responsibilities. As the executive principal from Brainerd High School explained:

One of the early conversations I remember is how to help your staff understand that this is not one more thing that we now have to do. This is integrated work... It's not, we now have to do these extra steps to comply with what's required for community schools. The idea is trying to help teaching staff understand how to implement and integrate without seeing this as some isolated entity.

Summer sessions specifically for principals also focus on collaborative leadership structures, including how to build and support site-based steering committees and share decision-making power with school community members.

For community school coordinators, a key focus of the summer sessions is building their capacity to conduct data-informed strategic planning. HCS partnered with the National Center for Community Schools to provide coordinators with training on conducting assets and needs assessments, a foundational community school practice in which coordinators gather input from students, families, and educators to identify priorities and guide implementation of the community school approach. The community school coordinator from Brainerd High School was also selected for a year-long mentorship with the National Center for Community Schools, focusing on data-informed implementation of the community school strategy.

Though community school coordinators have been trained on how to conduct assets and needs assessments, the HCS Director of Community Impact and Partnership shared that the implementation of these assessments was uneven across school sites and that coordinators often relied on other data sources to inform their implementation priorities. For example, she explained that because coordinators are members of their school's SSP teams, the data discussed within these teams has become an important source of information regarding community needs and assets. As the HCS Director of Community Impact and Partnership explained:

The coordinator's presence in the meetings gives them a chance to better understand the landscape of what is happening within the school. Having an ear to the ground and being cognizant of what kids are experiencing across spaces, including mental and physical health, housing stability, and other areas, allows coordinators to make stronger and more relevant connections to partners who can help meet those needs.

While community school coordinators use data-informed practices to guide their school-level work, these practices vary considerably across sites. This variation is largely due to coordinators' limited access to school- and district-level data, which creates barriers to the systematic continuous improvement that district officials identified as critical to the initiative's success. Although the Director of Community Impact and Partnership is working to address challenges in data-sharing agreements between HCS and lead agencies, access to needed data is currently most accessible to coordinators who have trusting

relationships within their schools. For example, the coordinator at Brainerd High School has been able to develop an effective data gathering system because of the strong relationships she holds with her fellow SSP team members.

HCS has also introduced a data tracking system and feedback mechanism that is widely used by community school coordinators to document and share practices and progress. Specifically, the Director of Community Impact and Partnership at HCS has introduced the Community Forward School Organizer, a spreadsheet template in which coordinators track practices aligned with the CSF Framework such as family and community engagement events, community-connected learning opportunities, and in-kind contributions. The community school coordinator at Brainerd High School has effectively used the organizer to document the school's active partnerships with over 40 community-based organizations, churches, and businesses.

Moreover, to capture important feedback from coordinators and systems-level partners, the Director of Community Impact and Partnerships conducts session evaluations after every coordinator meeting and summer convening. She also conducts quarterly partner meetings bringing together community school coordinators, principals, lead agency supervisors, and district staff to review partnership health and address emerging concerns. These practices reflect a commitment to ongoing learning and allow for critical reflection as the district works to improve cross-agency data access and standardize priority-setting processes across school sites.

Together, these aspects of systems-level infrastructure in place at HCS—strategic partnerships, sustainable resources, shared governance structures, professional learning opportunities, data systems, and continuous improvement—support schools to successfully enact the key practices of the CSF Framework, as described below.

5.2. Community School Implementation Using the CSF Framework

Brainerd High School demonstrates comprehensive implementation of all six practices outlined in the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework). Building on the widely used Four-Pillars framework—integrated student supports, expanded learning opportunities, family engagement, and collaborative leadership—the CSF Framework adds two additional practices emphasizing rigorous classroom instruction and positive school climate. At Brainerd High School, these practices operate in mutually reinforcing ways, strengthened by the depth and quality of the school's community partnerships and the community school coordinator's role as a cross-boundary connector. Early support for the initiative was shaped by how Community Schools Forward was introduced in Chattanooga. As Brainerd High School's executive principal explained:

Connections and rapport and relationships will make or break any initiative.... Through the rollout process of introducing Community Forward to the city of Chattanooga, ...we were able to meet and connect with all the Community Forward coordinators and partners who supported the initiative. It didn't feel like an uncomfortable mandate—it felt like an exciting partnership that was about to take off.

5.2.1. Integrated Student Supports

The [community school coordinator] and Dr. Sorrells work really intentionally to make sure that our students at Brainerd have basic necessities as well as elements that are going to help their futures. (Dr. Tiffany Earvin, Midtown Learning Community Superintendent)

As described in the opening quote, Brainerd High School provides integrated student supports that address both students' basic needs and their long-term success. These integrated student supports include tiered services and resources, anchored by a Family Resource Center. The center was created by repurposing a former computer center, with Steam Logistics serving as the primary community partner in the conversion. The center houses food, clothing, school and household supplies, and other essential items—donated through partnerships with over 40 community organizations, including local businesses, national companies such as Blue Cross Blue Shield, faith organizations, the YMCA, and the Tennessee Department of Health. It also includes a washer and dryer, offices for the community school coordinator and school social worker, and a central meeting space used by students, families, community partners, and school staff. In this way, Brainerd High School's Family Resource Center functions as a hub for coordinating supports and connecting students and families to school and community resources. Integrated student supports at Brainerd High School also focus on students' social and emotional well-being, including advisory periods, counseling services, and peer mental health programs.

5.2.2. Expanded and Enriched Learning Opportunities

I love the 40/40 program because it's never a dull moment. They always show that they love you, that's what I like. Everybody's always happy. I like stuff like that. They have shown what our future can be. (Student focus group)

The opening quote shares one student's positive experience in the 40/40 program, highlighting a supportive and joyful environment where students feel cared for and encouraged about their futures. This program is part of Brainerd High School's expanded and enriched learning opportunities that give students meaningful ways to connect, explore interests, and build skills beyond the traditional classroom. Students at Brainerd High School can participate in sports, band, and over 40 teacher-led clubs. Offered every other Friday for 60–90 min during the school day, these clubs provide dedicated time for engagement and enrichment in areas such as music, art, film, board games, cosmetology, and other interests. Students can also participate in civic engagement and leadership programs, including Urban League, Girls Inc., 40/40, and the HCS Student Leadership Council. Moreover, the school offers after-school tutoring for students who need additional academic support. By connecting students with teachers, mentors, tutors, peers, and community organizations, these opportunities complement integrated student supports and strengthen students' sense of belonging and engagement in school.

5.2.3. Culture of Belonging, Safety, and Care and Student and Family Engagement

Some of these kids come in here [her office] and they'll tell me this is my safe place.... Just coming in this school is my safe place. (Social Worker, Brainerd High School)

The social worker at Brainerd High School describes students experiencing the school as a "safe place," with some even identifying her office as a personal source of safety and support. This reflects the school's efforts to foster a culture of belonging, safety, and care while promoting meaningful student and family engagement through a variety of initiatives. These include Student Advisory, a small teacher-led group providing personalized support and mentoring; the Black History Month Program and Hispanic Heritage Celebration; the Alumni Picnic; the Friendsgiving Luncheon; and the Christmas Fundraiser for BHS Students. The school also implements Sown to Grow, an online socioemotional learning tool that helps students reflect on their feelings and allows the school to monitor well-being and provide targeted support for student mental health. Combined with regular home-school communication, these activities create pathways for students and

families to engage meaningfully in school life and cultivate a Beloved Community—a welcoming environment where every individual is supported and cared for. Together, these efforts strengthen relationships among students, families, staff, and community partners, and foster a positive and inclusive school climate that one parent described as “amazing.”

5.2.4. Rigorous, Community-Connected Classrooms

So, I think that’s the blessing with having the leadership that we have and the instructional coaches that we have, because it allows me to try things that you just normally don’t try in a regular classroom to be able to just keep them engaged. ...I think that’s a beautiful thing. (Teacher, Future Ready Institute-Entrepreneurship)

The teacher quoted above illustrates how Brainerd High School’s leadership team and coaches fostered a school environment that encouraged innovation in teaching and learning while maintaining a clear focus on student engagement. Rather than viewing innovation and accountability as competing priorities, teachers described them as complementary features of the school’s approach to implementing rigorous, community-connected classrooms. This balance between autonomy and accountability was reflected in school expectations. Teachers were expected to post daily learning targets aligned to state standards and submit weekly lesson plans using a schoolwide template. Teachers’ descriptions suggest that these shared expectations established consistency across classrooms while preserving opportunities for instructional adaptation. Teachers further described how learning extended beyond the classroom through the district’s core practice of Future Ready Institutes (FRIs). Brainerd High School offered three FRIs: Aviation; Entrepreneurship; and Law, First Responders, and Forensic Science. These institutes were characterized as pathways that connected classroom learning to authentic career experiences. For example, field trips, guest speakers, and mentoring served as key strategies for connecting academic concepts to real-world contexts. Students also had opportunities to accelerate their learning through the school’s Dual Enrollment program with Chattanooga State University. These examples illustrate how Brainerd High School connected rigorous academic learning with community, career, and postsecondary experiences.

At the same time, teachers acknowledged that implementing these community-connected approaches required navigating competing demands. While they valued the flexibility to design engaging learning experiences, they also described the constraints created by state and district accountability requirements. As one teacher explained, there was a need to “be very strategic in what I teach, how I teach it, how it’s delivered to the kids, which can be frustrating at times.” This tension suggests that teachers continually negotiated the balance between meeting mandated expectations and creating engaging learning experiences. Despite these challenges, teachers consistently described leadership support and coaching as important for sustaining innovative practices within the realities of accountability.

5.2.5. Collaborative Leadership

Some of my colleagues have even briefly served in the role that I serve now before taking on the current roles that they have. So, I know that they can truly understand some of the things that I’m going through or go through. I do lean on my team to problem solve. (Community School Coordinator, Brainerd High School)

As described by the community school coordinator at Brainerd High School, successful community school implementation depends on the shared expertise and collective problem-solving that characterize collaborative leadership. In this context, leadership is

distributed across multiple roles, with staff drawing on one another's professional knowledge and experience to address student and family needs. For example, coordination of resources, services, and supports occurs through regular meetings of the Student Success Planning (SSP) team, which includes the executive principal, community school coordinator, school social worker, two school counselors, the school nurse, truancy specialist, and student support coach. This team uses school-level data, direct experience with students and families, and resources provided through community partnerships to respond to barriers to learning and wellbeing. This structure reflects a shared model of decision-making in which student support is informed by multiple professional perspectives.

Collaborative leadership also extends beyond school-based personnel through the school's FRI Advisory Boards. These boards include school staff (including the community school coordinator) and community partners in aviation, business, and legal, emergency, and medical services who work together to plan, coordinate, and implement Institute activities. By integrating educator and industry perspectives, these advisory structures expand the range of expertise shaping program development and help ensure that learning opportunities are responsive to both student needs and community contexts. This suggests that leadership at Brainerd High School is intentionally structured to leverage both school and community resources. Central to these practices is the community school coordinator, who serves as a cross-boundary connector linking school-based staff, families, and community partners in coordinated support efforts.

5.2.6. The Community School Coordinator as a Cross-Boundary Connector

The effectiveness of Brainerd High School's community school coordinator is grounded in her strong relational ties to the executive principal, school staff, and the broader community, as well as her intentional efforts at communication, role clarification, and reciprocal exchange. As a school alumna and former teacher in the Midtown Learning Community, she brings a high level of contextual knowledge to the role. This embeddedness within the school and surrounding community enables her to more effectively connect individuals, resources, and initiatives across settings. She documents community school resources, partnerships, and activities in the Community Forward School Organizer and describes the position as "the best role I've ever served in," also characterizing her close relationship and shared vision with the executive principal as a "love story."

Her role includes building shared understanding of the community school strategy and CSF framework among staff and partners. This begins with an early-year presentation in which she introduces her role and communicates expectations to staff, stating, "I am going to be in everybody's business. That's kind of my job." She describes this initial communication as setting "the tone at the beginning of the school year and making the rest of my school year a lot easier." She also maintains ongoing visibility and communication through participation in school-wide professional development, department-level "Quality Circles," and meetings with the FRI advisory boards.

The coordinator's role also involves sustained engagement with the Student Success Planning (SSP) team, where collaboration is structured around shared responsibility for student needs. She relies on the SSP team's expertise in student health, wellbeing, and family engagement, while the team relies on her knowledge of and access to city services and resources. The importance of trust within this collaborative structure is illustrated in her reflection on team dynamics:

"The biggest thing I think that helps with our collaboration... is we know and respect each other's lines. So, it's the fact of knowing and respecting that if [a team member] says they know this parent and they got it, then they got it."

Through her work as a cross-boundary connector, the coordinator extends the function of the school as a site of integrated support. She describes a goal of her work as ensuring that students “don’t need to go home throughout the day,” explaining, “So, whether it’s a change of clothes or if we’re having an episode and you need to come calm down, the community school, it’s a home away from home.” In this way, her work reflects the broader goals of the CSF framework, laying the groundwork for positive outcomes for the Brainerd High School community.

5.3. Student and Family Experiences and Outcomes

Community school implementation at Brainerd High School has positively affected student and family experiences and outcomes. This influence has been most evident in their access to services and programs; positive evolutions in school climate and discipline; and associated improvements in student attendance, behavior, and college and career readiness.

5.3.1. Access to Services and Programs

Participants consistently described expanded access to services and opportunities as one of the most visible outcomes of the community school strategy. Through the establishment of the Family Resource Center and partnerships with multiple community organizations, Brainerd High School has increased access to resources and supports available to students, families, and community members. These resources are available to assist students and families in meeting their daily responsibilities and demands, as well as managing crises like the deadly flooding that occurred in Chattanooga in August 2025. One parent affected by the flood recounted that the school “helped a lot with cleaning supplies” and even offered a cleanup crew “to help remove the water and debris” from her home, exemplifying the school’s role as a stabilizing presence within the community.

Moreover, students and families have access to information about programs and scholarships that support post-secondary success as well as to a variety of clubs and programs that promote school engagement, student leadership, and service learning. These programs are described as both fun and impactful. For example, one student described 40/40—a mentorship and leadership program—as “the best thing that has happened to me” (Student focus group).

Additionally, Brainerd High School’s Future Ready Institutes equip students with practical skills and hands-on experience, ensuring that post-graduation pathways extend beyond traditional academics. The executive principal emphasized this broader approach to post-secondary preparation:

We went from having just a college and career fair in the spring to an Opportunity Expo, where potential employers come in and can hire students on the spot for the summer. Not every student will be able to go to college, and not every student will attend a two- or four-year college. We want to make sure they have all of these opportunities in front of them.

Collectively, these initiatives highlight the school’s evolving role as a place where students and families can access the resources, relationships, and opportunities needed to thrive.

5.3.2. Climate and Discipline

Students and families also linked Brainerd High School’s community school practices to shifts in the school’s relational climate, describing an increased sense of belonging, care, and mutual support across the school community. Observations and focus group reflections suggest that teacher–student relationships have become more interactive and

supportive. One student noted that in earlier years, teachers “just give you work and then just leave it there for you to do... [they] wouldn’t explain anything” but in recent years, “teachers interact with you. They explain everything you need. They even give you more than what they’re supposed to and they help you out.”

During a first-period student advisory, a small-group discussion on the consequences of conformity highlighted how these relationships function to support social and emotional learning at Brainerd High School. As the teacher guided a conversation on the consequences of conformity, she shared personal experiences with peer pressure as a model for students, who over the course of the period shared insights about their own efforts to find a balance between autonomy and fitting in with others. One student commented, “If you hang with the wrong people, that can lead to bad behaviors like vaping.” Another added that conforming can also lead to positive friendships where students influence each other in good ways. The teacher affirmed both points and summarized that “there are positive and negative aspects to conformity.”

Students also recognized a positive change in how students engaged with one another—and the benefits of having targeted interventions focused on student behavior and “just students supporting students.” For example, a participant in the Student Government Association focus group described her role as a Student Restorative at Brainerd High School. In this role, she is mentored by the school’s student support coach to help resolve student conflicts and provide emotional support. She explained:

For example, if I’m in a hallway and I see someone sad, or a conflict, I say, okay, let me go find [the student support coach] and we can try to resolve it. I’m leading it, not [the student support coach], but he is there. So, I’m saying, “Okay, what made you feel like this? When they did this, why did you feel like that?”

Across both focus groups, students described a school that was calmer and more caring since community school implementation: “When I first got here, it was like rowdy, like a lot of fights and stuff. It’s not really that many fights anymore. The school has changed a lot. Kids have changed. I feel like everybody has changed.”

Families similarly described Brainerd High School as warm and welcoming, not only for special occasions like Friendsgiving and Hispanic Heritage celebrations, but throughout the school year. Families also described having regular communication with teachers and administrators through “weekly texts and updates, phone calls, and emails,” as well as in the community when encountering staff while shopping or running errands. Importantly, communication was not limited to issues of behavior and discipline but was equally likely to celebrate successes—like when one family received a “good call” from her daughter’s Spanish teacher when she was selected as “student of the month”—or to assist with addressing students’ social, emotional, or academic needs.

Families also noted the reciprocity in the relationship between families and school staff that made them feel more like family than clients, as illustrated in the following focus group excerpt:

I feel welcome because like the staff is so polite. They’re always greeting you with a smile. Nobody’s rude. It seems like they understand you as a person... Like if I ask them, “How are you doing?” They actually might say, “Well, today’s been a rough day. I went through this, but it’s getting better.” Instead of, “Oh, it’s okay.” You know, like most people would do. It’s more special that they actually will open up to you, like you’re family, like you’re part of a community.

5.3.3. Student Attendance, Behavior, and College and Career Readiness

Participants described improvements in attendance, behavior, and future planning as emerging from the school’s relational climate and expanded supports. One student

explained the relationship as reciprocal, “Now we see that the teachers are actually here for us and not just the money.... So, it’s like, okay, y’all here for us, we do something for you. Give and take.”

As presented in Table 2, the school has seen a steady improvement in student attendance (including declining chronic absenteeism rates) as well as student behavior, measured by the number of out-of-school suspensions. These outcomes are critical to the school’s goals of meeting and exceeding state and federal standards for school excellence. Alongside these significant changes, there have been increases in graduation rates and college and career readiness that have contributed to individual and collective pride.

Students in our focus groups spoke proudly about improvements in their grades and their plans for the future. A male student in the group explained that he struggled with behavior more than academics in his freshman year, “but when they put me in this [40/40] program, it made me want to go harder.” Similarly, a female student described academic missteps in her freshman year that she corrected, noting “My 9th grade year, I should have listened. My 10th grade year, I loved my 10th grade year. My teachers... Oh my God, I love them so much.” Now, as a junior she has already secured two scholarships, one to Middle Tennessee University and the other to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Another student currently participating in Brainerd High School’s dual enrollment program described her plans to finish her associate’s degree before completing a bachelor’s degree at Middle Tennessee State University and a master’s degree to become a trauma bond counselor. Another student shared his desire to pursue a career in business as an entrepreneur. When asked how they were supported in developing such precise and thoughtful plans for their futures, students collectively attributed their clarity to “opportunities to explore what you might want to do in the future” specifically through the school’s diverse programs and the guidance and encouragement received from administrators and staff. One student explained: “They all on us about getting stuff done and not waiting until the last minute. So, I didn’t want to wait until the last minute to have a plan.”

Families also positively described the changes they have seen in their children’s school behavior and achievement. One parent shared that when attending another school, her daughter engaged in fights that limited her school success, but since transferring to Brainerd High School, her behavior and math achievement have improved. She explained, “She has not once fought here. Also, [my daughter] hated math, but now because I guess the teachers interact with them, get to know them better, how to teach them differently—she’s doing better, a lot better.”

Of note, families discussed improved learning and college and career readiness opportunities not only for typically developing students but also for those with disabilities. Family focus group participants noted that Brainerd High School was an inclusive environment committed to seeing all students succeed. One parent, who also worked at the school, noted a difference in how Brainerd High School “pushes for our kids.” She explained that her son is autistic and that the high school he graduated from did not provide her with information or support with post-secondary planning. In comparison, she discussed Brainerd High School’s intentional approach to informing families about postsecondary opportunities, citing Project Search as an example.

Project Search is a national model for transitioning students with intellectual and developmental disabilities from high school into employment through internships at community businesses. After completing the program, the parent explained, “They [program participants] have a skill set and depending on what skill set they have, they’ll go to either Blue Cross, Cigna, or Erlanger. By the time they finish that program, they have a job.” The parent went on to explain that “Brainerd is like the top, the lead as far as the highest percentage of successful folks through this program” in the district.

A community partner instrumental in establishing the 40/40 program and a member of the high school's large and active alumni association—which provides tens of thousands of dollars in scholarship funds to Brainerd High School students annually, reflected on the ways the school shaped both his identity and sense of responsibility:

I went to Brainerd High School. And so, for me, it's who I am through and through. I love this school. It gave me so much—the pride that I have, not only in the school, but the pride that I have in being an African American man... And so I always find a way to pour back into the place that I came from, that helped make me who I am. I would like to provide our youth with some of the great things that we had.

Building on this foundation of community engagement and shared responsibility, the community school strategy has also provided a mechanism through which a shared vision among district, school, and community stakeholders—centered on student success—can be realized. Through its integrated approach, which leverages the assets of students' families and communities, Brainerd High School is meeting the challenge expressed by the Midtown Learning Community Superintendent:

I challenged my principals at the beginning of this fiscal year, as well as my team at the beginning of this fiscal year to build a legacy. And so, we're building a legacy, brick by brick. We can't change how we're perceived in a matter of a few months or a year. But what we can do is show by our work in our schools how we're supporting our kids, how we're elevating our teachers, how we're elevating our schools period, so that they can see the change. Sometimes if you speak it, they don't necessarily hear it, but when they see it, they start to believe it.

The voices of teachers, students, families, and city, district, and school staff across the study illustrate how Brainerd High School's implementation of the CSF Framework—facilitated by the infrastructure and enabling conditions provided by HCS and the city of Chattanooga—is systematically cultivating belief in a renewed legacy and shared sense of purpose.

6. Discussion

This study is limited by a relatively short period of field engagement at the site, which constrained the extent to which longer-term dynamics and variations in practice across the school year could be observed. Additionally, participant sampling focused primarily on individuals most engaged in community school practices and implementation. While this approach yielded rich, experience-based insights, it may have underrepresented the perspectives of less-engaged or less-visible actors across school, community, and systems levels. Despite these limitations, the case of HCS and Brainerd High School provides insight into how a systems approach to community school implementation can create the conditions necessary for both scaling the strategy and centering authentic community engagement in school revitalization efforts. Rather than relying on isolated, school-level initiatives, HCS has developed a coherent infrastructure aligned with the Community Schools Forward: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation Framework (CSF Framework) that supports sustained, community-engaged practices. At Brainerd High School, this systems-level approach is associated with expanded access to services and programs, a more inclusive and supportive school climate, and increased opportunities for school and postsecondary success. Collectively, these shifts suggest that the school is moving closer to reclaiming its historical role as a source of community pride and engagement. The broader contributions and implications of this study are discussed below.

6.1. Contributions to the Literature

First, this study extends existing research on community schools by demonstrating the role of district-level infrastructure in supporting both implementation and long-term sustainability of the strategy. Prior research has emphasized the importance of leadership, partnerships, and coordination in community schools (Adams 2020; Maier et al. 2017). This case illustrates how these conditions are facilitated through continuous professional learning, cross-sector governance, dedicated staffing, and collaboration with lead agencies. Consistent with other case studies (see, for example, Hernández et al. 2025), this study suggests that district-level infrastructure is not merely supportive of community school implementation but may be a critical condition for sustaining the strategy over time.

Second, this study contributes to scholarship on community engagement more generally by showing how authentic engagement is fostered through organizational and relational capacity rather than isolated school-based activities. Existing literature has documented the value and challenges of school-community partnerships (Chadwick 2003; Daramola et al. 2023; Hands 2023; Sanders 2001). The present case extends this work by suggesting that meaningful engagement is strengthened when districts establish mechanisms that enable relationship-building, inclusive decision making, and shared vision and ownership among schools, families, and community partners. These findings thus deepen understanding of community engagement as a capacity embedded within district and school improvement efforts.

Third, this study contributes to a growing but still limited body of case study research on community school implementation in secondary settings (Hands 2010; McKinney de Royston and Madkins 2020; Sanders and Galindo 2022). Specifically, it generates insights into how the community school strategy functions in a high school with strong implementation and how the strategy may support adolescent development and educational attainment through a focus on student engagement, school climate, and postsecondary readiness.

Finally, this study contributes evidence from a Southern district context. By examining implementation within this setting, it broadens understanding of how community school strategies are adapted across diverse political, historical, and institutional contexts. These findings underscore the importance of local context in shaping how educational reform principles are translated into practice.

6.2. Implications for District and School Practice

6.2.1. Build District-Level Infrastructure Before Scaling Community Schools

District leaders seeking to implement or expand community schools should prioritize the development of district-level infrastructure that supports coordination and learning across schools. Findings from this study suggest that community schools benefit when implementation is supported by districtwide structures rather than pursued as isolated school-based initiatives. Such structures include strategic partnerships, mechanisms for shared governance, and data-sharing systems among key school, district, and lead agency partners.

A particularly important component of this infrastructure is ongoing professional learning for community school coordinators. Coordinators occupy complex boundary-spanning roles that require them to navigate relationships among schools, families, service providers, and community organizations. Districts can strengthen implementation by creating opportunities for coordinators to share effective practices and collaboratively address common challenges. These opportunities may reduce isolation, improve implementation consistency, and support continuous improvement across schools.

6.2.2. Invest in Sustained Capacity Building Across Roles

Districts should view community school implementation as an organizational change effort rather than a stand-alone program. As a result, capacity-building efforts should extend beyond community school coordinators to include principals, teachers, counselors, and other staff whose work intersects with student and family supports.

Findings from this study suggest that effective professional learning should be systematic, collaborative, and embedded within practice. Districts should create opportunities for educators to learn from peers within and across schools, engage with regional and national community school networks, and develop skills necessary to conduct needs assessments, coordinate partnerships, interpret multiple forms of data, and facilitate authentic collaboration across boundaries of race, class, and other forms of structural inequality.

School leaders also play a critical role in creating conditions for success. Principals should actively integrate community school strategies into school improvement planning, instructional priorities, and organizational decision-making processes. Embedding the strategy within the broader mission and operations of the school can help ensure that partnerships and supports are aligned with educational goals.

6.2.3. Institutionalize Partnerships to Promote Long-Term Sustainability

Findings from this study indicate that partnership sustainability is strengthened when responsibilities, expectations, and decision-making processes are clearly defined and shared among participating organizations. Leaders should establish formal agreements with community partners, develop shared accountability structures, and create data-sharing agreements and systems for monitoring progress toward common goals. In addition, districts should seek diversified funding streams that reduce reliance on a single grant or funding source. These strategies can help protect community school initiatives from leadership transitions, funding fluctuations, and other organizational disruptions.

6.2.4. Create Structures for Authentic Community Engagement Across School Levels and Contexts

District and school leaders should move beyond episodic consultation and establish structures that enable sustained participation by students, families, and community partners. Findings from this study suggest that authentic engagement is strengthened when school and community actors have meaningful opportunities to contribute to decision-making, identify priorities, and co-construct solutions. Mechanisms such as advisory councils, participatory planning processes, and shared governance structures may help ensure that community engagement functions as an ongoing partnership rather than a series of discrete activities. These structures can also strengthen trust, increase responsiveness to local needs, and build collective ownership for school improvement efforts.

District and school leaders must also attend to implementation across school levels, tailoring community engagement efforts to the unique organizational structures and varied needs of students and families at each level. For example, at the high school level, school leaders should design engagement strategies that reflect the realities of departmentalized instruction, diverse postsecondary pathways, and declining family engagement that often accompanies the transition to high school. Investments in college and career readiness partnerships, student leadership and mentoring programs, and family outreach may be particularly important in secondary settings.

More broadly, district leaders should adapt community school implementation to local historical, political, and community conditions rather than adopting standardized models. Findings from this study suggest that the success of community schools may depend on aligning the strategy with local assets, needs, and relationships.

6.3. Directions for Future Research

While there is a growing body of evidence on the effectiveness of community schools (Johnston et al. 2020; Maier et al. 2017; Swain et al. 2025), additional research is needed to deepen understanding of the experiences of specific student groups. Although not a primary focus of this study, findings highlighted Brainerd High School's intentional efforts to support students with disabilities. A more in-depth focus on these students, as well as others such as students experiencing homelessness and English learners, will help ensure that the strategy fulfills its promise of effectively serving students across a range of backgrounds and circumstances.

Additionally, given the distinct historical, political, and social dynamics that shape educational reform, research is needed to document how community schools are implemented across diverse contexts, including the South, a region that has recently become the focus of community school expansion efforts (Sneed 2021). Such research can deepen understanding of how local conditions shape implementation and outcomes and inform efforts to adapt and scale the community school strategy nationally.

Likewise, family engagement remains an underexplored dimension of community school implementation and has been identified by 2023 Full-Service Community School grantees as a particularly challenging pillar of practice (Mathematica and National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance 2026). Future research should investigate how community schools can effectively and authentically engage families as partners in student learning and development, from early childhood through high school, and how such engagement contributes to improved outcomes.

There is also a need for greater attention to instructional integration—that is, how community school strategies can be more intentionally connected to rigorous, community-engaged teaching and learning within classrooms. Understanding this connection is critical for ensuring that community schools not only address non-academic barriers but also enhance academic achievement in ways that are equitable and culturally sustaining (McKinney de Royston and Madkins 2020).

7. Conclusions

The case of HCS and Brainerd High School underscores the importance of a systems approach to community school implementation. By investing in supportive infrastructure, fostering cross-sector partnerships, and prioritizing capacity-building, HCS has created the conditions necessary for meaningful and sustainable school transformation. The findings highlight the potential of community schools to address complex educational challenges, particularly at the secondary level, while also pointing to important areas for continued inquiry and improvement. As historic investments in community schools continue to grow nationwide, it is increasingly critical for education leaders to understand how to implement and sustain high-quality community schools in both policy and practice. HCS and Brainerd High School offer a valuable example for districts looking to support and expand community school initiatives that help all students to “thrive in life.”

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, original draft preparation, writing, and review and editing of the manuscript. Authorship order reflects relative leadership and overall contribution. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was supported by the Ballmer Group, Grant #2023-3169. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funder.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to exemption in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104(d)(1&2(ii)) by the Salus Institutional Review Board (code number: 23488 and approval date: 13 February 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The qualitative interview and focus group data presented in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality restrictions. The IRB-approved consent procedures did not include provisions for public data sharing; therefore, any data sharing will require additional participant consent.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank Hamilton County Schools for permitting this study and the research participants for generously sharing their insights and experiences. We also acknowledge Caitlyne Steward, Director of Community Impact and Partnership, for her assistance in facilitating data collection and for her valuable contributions through interviews and correspondence. We further thank Jacqueline Thomas, Community Forward Program Director for the city of Chattanooga, as well as Crystal Sorrells, executive principal of Brainerd High School, and the community school coordinator, for their support and cooperation during this study. Finally, we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments, which helped deepen and sharpen our analysis.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In the United States, school districts are government entities that provide public elementary and secondary education to students within a specific territory.
- ² The Theory of Action for Community School Transformation outlines the activities practitioners can undertake, the expected outcomes, and the key structures that support the maturation and sustainability of the strategy. See: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/community-schools-forward> (accessed on 12 February 2026).
- ³ The Outcomes and Indicators for Community Schools: A Guide for Implementers and Evaluators identifies realistic expectations for impact areas, specifies short- and medium-term outcomes, and provides measures to monitor progress and support continuous improvement. See: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/community-schools-forward> (accessed on 12 February 2026).
- ⁴ School districts across the United States use a variety of titles for the community school coordinator role. In HCS, this position is referred to as Community Forward School Coordinator. However, this article uses the more general term.
- ⁵ The All-Subjects Growth Level for Highest Need Students is based on composite scores from the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS)—a statistical model used to measure year-over-year student academic growth in Tennessee schools—across all tested subjects. Schools are assigned a Level from 1 to 5 based on students' growth, with Level 1 indicating the lowest growth and Level 5 the highest. A Level 5 reflects significant evidence that students exceeded expected growth on state assessments, while a Level 1 reflects significant evidence that students fell below expected growth. See: <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/school/003300021/performance/growth> (accessed on 1 March 2026).
- ⁶ For more information about Opportunity 2030, see: <https://hcde.org/opportunity-2030/> (accessed on 20 May 2026).

References

- Adams, Curtis M. 2020. Sustaining full-service community schools: Lessons from the Tulsa area community schools initiative. In *Reviewing the Success of Full-Service Community Schools in the US*. London: Routledge, pp. 147–76.
- Anderson-Butcher, Dawn, E. Gwyn Stetler, and Theresa Midle. 2006. A case for expanded school-community partnerships in support of positive youth development. *Children & Schools* 28: 155–63.
- Baxley, Gwendolyn. 2024. Community schooling for whom? Black families, anti-Blackness and resources in community schools. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 27: 875–95.
- Benson, Lee, Ira Harkavy, Michael C. Johaneck, and John Puckett. 2009. The enduring appeal of community schools. *American Educator* 33: 22–47.

- Benson, Peter L., Peter C. Scales, Nancy Leffert, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain. 1999. *A Fragile Foundation: The State of Developmental Assets Among American Youth*. St. Paul: Search Institute.
- Bradley, Ann. 1996. Board ponders district merger in Chattanooga. *Education Week*, March 20. Available online: <https://www.ed-week.org/leadership/board-ponders-district-merger-in-chattanooga/1996/03> (accessed on 5 February 2026).
- Casto, Hope G. 2016. “Just One More Thing I Have to Do”: School-Community Partnerships. *School Community Journal* 26: 139–62.
- Chadwick, Kathy G. 2003. *Improving Schools Through Community Engagement: A Practical Guide for Educators*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Coburn, Cynthia E. 2003. Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher* 32: 3–12.
- Comer, James P., ed. 1999. *Child by Child: The Comer Process for Change in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Community Schools Forward. 2023. Framework: Essentials for Community School Transformation. Available online: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/community-schools-forward> (accessed on 25 January 2026).
- Dandaneau, Steven P. 1996. *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization*. Albany: Suny Press.
- Daramola, Eupha J., Julie A. Marsh, and Taylor N. Allbright. 2023. Advancing or inhibiting equity: The role of racism in the implementation of a community engagement policy. *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 22: 787–810.
- Dryfoos, Joy G. 1991. *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dryfoos, Joy G. 1999. The role of the school in children’s out-of-school time. *The Future of Children* 9: 117–34.
- FitzGerald, Anne Marie, and Sandra Quiñones. 2018. The community school coordinator: Leader and professional capital builder. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 3: 272–86.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2006. Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12: 219–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>.
- Fullan, Michael. 2004. Leadership across the system. *Insight* 61: 14–17.
- Galindo, Claudia, Mavis Sanders, and Yolanda Abel. 2017. Transforming educational experiences in low-income communities: A qualitative case study of social capital in a full-service community school. *American Educational Research Journal* 54: 140S–63S.
- Galindo, Claudia L., and Mavis G. Sanders. 2022. Teachers’ academic optimism and professional practice in an urban full-service community high school. *Journal of Educational Change* 23: 521–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09430-6>.
- Grenier, Amanda. 2023. The qualitative embedded case study method: Exploring and refining gerontological concepts via qualitative research with older people. *Journal of Aging Studies* 65: 101138.
- Hamilton County Schools. n.d. Community Forward. Available online: <https://hcde.org/cip/community-forward/> (accessed on 17 February 2026).
- Hands, Catherine. 2005. “It’s who you know” and “what you know”: The process of creating partnerships between schools and communities. *School Community Journal* 15: 63–84.
- Hands, Catherine. 2010. Why collaborate? The differing reasons for secondary school educators’ establishment of school–community partnerships. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21: 189–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243450903553993>.
- Hands, Catherine. 2023. *Pathways to Community Engagement in Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hernández, Laura, Sarah Klevan, and Emily Germain. 2025. *District Supports for Community Schools: How Systems Can Enable High-Quality Implementation*. Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute. Available online: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-district-supports-community-schools-brief> (accessed on 25 January 2026).
- Hiatt-Michael, Diana, and Michael P. Evans, eds. 2015. *The Power of Community Engagement for Educational Change*. Charlotte: IAP.
- Hudson, J., Jr. 2009. *Melton v. Young (6th Cir.) (1972)*. Murfreesboro: Free Speech Center, Middle Tennessee State University. Available online: <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/melton-v-young-6th-cir/> (accessed on 25 February 2026).
- Institute of Education Sciences [IES]. n.d. National Center for Education Statistics: Hamilton County School District. Available online: https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?ID2=4701590 (accessed on 2 February 2026).
- Jack, Rebecca, and Emily Oster. 2023. COVID-19, school closures, and outcomes. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 37: 51–70.
- Jacobson, Reuben, Lisa Villarreal, José Muñoz, and Robert Mahaffey. 2018. It takes a community: Community schools provide opportunities for all. *Phi Delta Kappan* 99: 8–13.
- Johnston, William R., John Engberg, Isaac M. Oppen, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis. 2020. *What Is the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative?* Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. Available online: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10107.html (accessed on 16 February 2026).
- Lasch-Quinn, E. 1993. *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890–1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Learning Policy Institute. n.d. Community Schools Forward. Available online: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/community-schools-forward> (accessed on 2 February 2026).
- Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Lloyd, Chrishana M., Mavis Sanders, Sara Shaw, Abigail Wulah, Hannah Wodrich, Kristen Harper, and Zabryna Balén. 2024. *A 100-Year Review of Research on Black Families: Volume II (1970–2019)*. Rockville: Child Trends. Available online: <https://www.child-trends.org/publications/100-year-research-black-families> (accessed on 1 February 2026).
- Maier, Anna. 2025. How states are investing in community schools. *State Education Standard* 25. Available online: <https://www.nasbe.org/how-states-are-investing-in-community-schools/> (accessed on 15 January 2026).
- Maier, Anna, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam. 2017. *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence*. Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute.
- Maier, Anna, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam. 2018. Community Schools: A Promising Foundation for Progress. *American Educator* 42: 17–22.
- Mathematica, and National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. 2026. *Initial Challenges Implementing the Full-Service Community Schools Approach and How FY 2023 Grantees Addressed Them*. Washington: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
- McAlister, Sara. 2013. Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround. *Voices in Urban Education* 36: 35–42.
- McKinney de Royston, Maxine, and Na'ilah S. Nasir. 2017. Racialized learning ecologies: Understanding race as a key feature of learning and developmental processes in schools. In *New Perspectives on Human Development*. Edited by Nancy Budwig, Elliot Turiel and Philip David Zelazo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 258–86.
- McKinney de Royston, Maxine, and Tia C. Madkins. 2020. A question of necessity or of equity? Full-service community schools and the (mis)education of Black youth. In *Reviewing the Success of Full-Service Community Schools in the US*. London: Routledge, pp. 63–97.
- Melaville, Atelia I., and Martin J. Blank. 1991. *What it Takes: Structuring Interagency Partnerships to Connect Children and Families with Comprehensive Services*. Washington: Education and Human Services Consortium.
- Mills, Albert J., Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, eds. 2010. Exemplary case design. In *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412957397.n134>.
- Morse, Janice M. 2015. Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research* 25: 1212–22.
- Okogbue, Obioma, Mavis Sanders, Joselyn Angeles-Figueroa, and Vanessa Sacks. 2022. *Recent Funding Approaches and Sources for Community Schools*. Rockville: Child Trends. <https://doi.org/10.56417/2217k4011n>.
- Phillips, Sandra F. 2010. Honoring 15 years of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program: A policy-centered analysis. *Afterschool Matters* 12: 28–36.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1995. Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6: 65–78.
- Quinn, Joan, and Michael Fullan. 2017. Coherence making: Whole system change strategy. In *Future Directions of Educational Change*. London: Routledge, pp. 223–37.
- Rochester, Shana E., Mavis Sanders, Dominique N. Martinez, and Jennifer Winston. 2025. A Systematic Review of the Research on Protective Community Resources for Children and Youth. *Journal of Community Psychology* 53: e70053. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.70053>.
- Sanders, Mavis, and Claudia Galindo. 2022. A whole child approach: Amplifying students' voices in a full-service community high school. *The High School Journal* 105: 91–107.
- Sanders, Mavis, Claudia Galindo, and Dante DeTablan. 2019. Leadership for collaboration: Exploring how community school coordinators advance the goals of full-service community schools. *Children and Schools* 41: 89–100.
- Sanders, Mavis G. 2001. The role of "community" in comprehensive school, family, and community partnership programs. *The Elementary School Journal* 102: 19–34.
- Sanders, Mavis G. 2003. Community involvement in schools: From concept to practice. *Education and Urban Society* 35: 161–80.
- Sanders, Mavis G. 2012. Achieving scale at the district level: A longitudinal multiple case study of a partnership reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48: 154–86.
- Shearer, John. 2019. The Brainerd High Crisis of 50 Years Ago and the Road to Wholeness, Part 8—Lessons Learned. Available online: <https://www.chattanooga.com/2019/10/11/397818/John-Shearer-The-Brainerd-High-Crisis.aspx> (accessed on 25 February 2026).

- Shearer, John. 2025. The Story of the Brainerd High Class of 1965. Available online: <https://www.chattanooga.com/2025/7/17/506049/John-Shearer-The-Story-Of-The-Brainerd.aspx> (accessed on 25 February 2026).
- Shiller, Jessica. 2024. Out of a crisis comes resilience: Community school coordinators work through the pandemic to generate social capital in Baltimore's neighborhoods. *The Urban Review* 56: 419–37.
- Sneed, Sara A. 2021. *Closing the Opportunity Gap: Supporting Community Schools in the South*. Washington: The NEA Foundation. Available online: <https://www.neafoundation.org/ideas-voices/closing-the-opportunity-gap-supporting-community-schools> (accessed on 1 June 2026).
- Spikes, Jakai. 2026. How Jesse Jackson tried to change Chattanooga schools from the inside. *News Channel 9 ABC*, February 17. Available online: <https://newschannel9.com/news/local/how-jesse-jackson-tried-to-change-chattanooga-schools-from-the-inside> (accessed on 25 February 2026).
- Stake, Robert E. 2005. Qualitative case studies. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 443–66.
- Swain, Walker, Melanie Leung-Gagné, Anna Maier, and Cassandra Rubinstein. 2025. *Community Schools Impact on Student Outcomes: Evidence from California*. Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/541.498>.
- Tennessee Department of Education. n.d. Brainerd High School. Available online: <https://tdepublisherschools.ondemand.sas.com/school/003300021> (accessed on 1 March 2026).
- Tennessee Department of Education. 2025. 2025 Performance Metrics: Growth. Available online: <https://tdepublisherschools.ondemand.sas.com/school/003300021/performance/growth> (accessed on 1 March 2026).
- Trattner, Walter I. 1998. *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*, 6th ed. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Valli, Linda, Amanda Stefanski, and Reuben Jacobson. 2013. Community support of schools: What kind and with what success? *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences* 106: 658–66.
- Warren, Mark R., and Karen L. Mapp. 2011. *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watson, Jane, Suzie Wright, Jeanne M. Allen, Ian Hay, Neil Cranston, and Kim Beswick. 2017. Increasing students' social capital through community involvement in rural and regional education. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* 27: 142–57.
- Yin, Robert K. 2018. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.