University-Supported Community Schools:  
One Organization's Journey

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Abstract

The Social Work Community Outreach Service (SWCOS) was developed in 1992 within the University of Maryland School of Social Work to expose graduate social work students to urban poor and vulnerable populations. Using a social justice lens, the organization has developed a framework for its community schools work, based on Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which includes six core principles or “non-negotiables”, which every community school must possess to be successful: positive school culture and climate; physical and mental wellness for every child; family stability; safe and secure school environment; successful academic performance; personal, family, community empowerment and self-determination. The framework moves beyond doing transactional work (meeting physiologic and safety needs) to doing transformative work (meeting esteem and belonging needs) to eventually fulfillment (meeting actualization needs). This article discusses SWCOS’ reflections on its community school journey thus far, its challenges and vision for the future.

University-Supported Community Schools: One Organization’s Journey

Overview and History of University of Maryland Community Schools

The Social Work Community Outreach Service (SWCOS) was developed in 1992 within the University of Maryland School of Social Work to expose graduate social work students to urban poor and vulnerable populations, in the hope that students would become interested in remaining to work with inner-city communities after graduation. Since then, SWCOS has become known across Baltimore for its grassroots organizing approach and social justice lens. With social work education at the core of SWCOS’ work, community practice has included community organizing initiatives, capacity-building with nonprofit organizations, case management and mental health services. Over the past ten years, SWCOS has provided mental health services within K-12 public schools and, as the community school movement grew, it seemed a natural transition for SWCOS to support community schools, much as it had supported many other community organizations.

As SWCOS transitioned from becoming mainly a mental health provider in schools to a community school operating partner, another organization within the School of Social Work, Promise Heights, also began to support community schools in a West Baltimore Promise Neighborhood. The University president had expressed a strong commitment to community engagement, and there were many programs of the university engaged in service to local schools; both with SWCOS, Promise Heights and independently. Every school on the professional graduate campus: Social Work, Dental, Medical, Pharmacy, Nursing and Law was somehow involved with community schools.

As field education is an important component of graduate social work education, our social work students are engaged in a variety of activities through their plan of study with SWCOS. Activities such as running a school-based food pantry; going on home visits, running parent groups, helping with the attendance team, crisis intervention, engaging community partners, case management and organizing parents around critical issues allow our students to apply the knowledge and skills learned in the university classroom under the supervision of seasoned SWCOS social workers. They multiply the reach of the Community School Coordinator several times over. Medical students often work alongside social work students to tutor children in math and science, or to lead classes in nutrition.

What we share in this article is the process and transformation SWCOS is currently undergoing. We have not arrived. We are asking difficult questions about where we are going and even where we have been. We are developing a framework within which to do our work, which we know will change and evolve as we mature. As an organization that believes in the community organizing principles of transparency and accountability, we are allowing ourselves to be transparent on our journey so that we may be accountable to our partners and stakeholders. This is our journey.

Our Guiding Philosophy

In the past two years, SWCOS has been working through a strategic planning process, which has required us to ask many difficult questions about our work, including why we work in community schools and what we hope to achieve. This has led us to some soul-searching about transactional versus transformative work. And this is not just the common adage of the difference between giving people fish and teaching them to fish, but the difference between the former two and encouraging community members to ask questions about why there are entire ponds and lakes without fish, while others are amply stocked, and then determining how to better ensure equity in the stocking of bodies of water, so that all might eat without struggle. In other
words, we want to encourage community members to begin addressing structural issues, which impact their communities and keep them poor and oppressed; issues which do not impact others in the same way. If we only deal with transactional issues we will never support communities in becoming empowered.

Let's look at a couple of examples of this. Most closely related to the fish adage is the issue of good nutrition. We often see children eating chips and donuts or drinking soda for breakfast in our schools. One of the topics we hear well-meaning volunteers discuss is the need for nutrition classes and nutrition classes are, indeed, necessary. But we also have to deal with the fact that some of our schools exist in food deserts, and that there is no grocery store within easy access for our families. We can teach families how to prepare healthy, nutritious meals, but if they can't get to a grocery store or can't afford healthy food when they get there, we have not addressed their issues. We want families to begin asking their local politicians why there are no grocery stores in their communities, and what they plan to do to secure access to healthy, affordable food for their constituents.

Another example: we can work with a young African-American man, see his potential, nurture him through school, and he will be arbitrarily subject to a stop and frisk procedure on the street. If he is found with marijuana, that misdemeanor charge might stop him from getting a job later in life and ruin his potential. We know that marijuana use between young whites and Blacks is roughly the same (ACLU, 2013), but the young White man is far less likely to be stopped than the young Black man, and so his marijuana will never be found. If we don't encourage the young Black man's parents (and other parents in our schools) to speak out against stop and frisk laws, all the time we spent teaching and nurturing him in school will be put at risk out on the street when he gets stopped as a result of racist policies which exist at the structural level.

While this might not seem, on the surface, like community school work, the more time we spend in community schools, the more convinced we are that this is exactly what community schools need to be about. Encouraging community advocacy is a critical part of our work.

It is impossible, or at the very least imprudent, to consider the learning outcomes of children in a school without first considering the environment in which the school, the student, and the student's family reside. Further prudence suggests that learning outcomes be viewed through a lens colored by an understanding of how that environment, over time (both the actual time in the child's life, and the cumulative time spent by generations of caretakers), alters the trajectory of the child throughout the education process. Families who live in poor neighborhoods are most likely to have lived in a similarly poor neighborhood for multiple generations. The effects of growing up within severely impoverished communities accumulate over generations, and are likely to continue to greatly impact individuals as they move into adulthood (Sharkey, 2013, p.17). For the purposes of this article, neighborhood and community will be used interchangeably to represent at once a geographic place defined by physical boundaries, a series of interconnected relationships, and a space within which people live, work and take part in daily activities (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2008).

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), in the United States, in 2011, 45% of children were low-income or poor. The percentage of low-income and poor children has risen from 40% in 2006 to 45% in 2011 (Addy, Engelhardt & Skinner, 2013). Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, urban communities saw a dramatic increase in concentrated urban poverty, as racial housing restrictions in the suburbs eased, and upwardly mobile African Americans moved into the suburbs, leaving behind a concentration of very poor families and individuals. Other theories about elements contributing to the increased concentration of poverty in urban communities includes the loss of manufacturing and other local jobs, economic and social disinvestment in cities, blight and decay (Yang & Jargowsky, 2006; Sessions & Wolch, 2008). Additionally, Black and Hispanic children are much more likely to live in poverty than their White counterparts, and those Black or Hispanic children are overwhelmingly more likely to live in communities made up mostly by people of the same race (Drake & Rank, 2009). This concentration of poverty is seen most clearly in older, industrial cities in the Northeast, such as Newark, New York and Baltimore (Ricketts & Sawhill, 1988).

While concentrations of poverty decreased in the 1990s, these Northeast cities still see a significant concentration of very poor people living in certain neighborhoods. In fact, poverty should consistently be considered within the neighborhood context, even more than in the family context since, even if a particular family is not impoverished, that family will experience a number of significant disadvantages, simply by virtue of living in a neighborhood of concentrated poverty (Drake & Rank, 2009). Living in poverty creates
significant stressors, which impact families’ ability to maintain healthy relationships, parent their children, and adapt to life circumstances (Conger, Conger & Martin, 2010; Conger, Schofield, Conger, & Neppi, 2010; Wadsworth, Rindlaub, Hurwich-Reiss, Rienks, Bianco & Markman, 2013).

The concentration of poor families and children in high poverty ghettos, barrios, and slums magnifies the problems faced by the poor. Concentrations of poor people lead to a concentration of the social ills that cause or are caused by poverty. Poor children in these neighborhoods not only lack basic necessities in their own homes, but also they must contend with a hostile environment that holds many temptations and few positive role models. Equally important, school districts and attendance zones are generally organized geographically, so that the residential concentration of the poor frequently results in low-performing schools (Jargowsky, 2003).

Since financing for public schools is drawn from local property taxes, and poor districts have a smaller tax base to draw from, children in poor neighborhoods are more likely to attend neighborhood schools, which are educationally inferior (Drake & Rank, 2009). So what happens when children from psychologically stressed families, who have parents with an impaired ability to problem-solve and cope with their life circumstances, are concentrated in schools with insufficient resources? As social workers, we recognize that assets already exist within schools and communities, which are often overlooked and sometimes even misunderstood. Identifying and strengthening these assets is critical to enhancing sustainable support systems that can maximize the potential of children and families in resource-poor communities.

To use a commonly understood framework, we have begun organizing our thinking about community schools around Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. We always understood that, as a partner organization, we provided support to schools by bringing in other partner organizations which could stock the food pantry, provide clothing, medical, dental, care, mental health and a host of other support to children and families. We also understood that we could engage parents in school activities and help them organize to have a voice in the school and to support the school leadership and staff. All these activities were designed to allow the educators to focus on what they do best: educate. However, what has become apparent to us is that unless the community-level trauma and disempowerment is addressed, we will still be here next year and several years thereafter, doing exactly the same things for the next generation of the same families without any forward movement. And that is not why we do this work. So the questions then become: 1) What do we hope to achieve?; 2) How can we move beyond the transactional level; and 3) What does it look like when higher level needs are fulfilled?

In response to the aforementioned items of inquiry, SWCOS staff identified six “non-negotiables”, or guiding principles, which we believe should exist in any community school we support. We believe they should exist in every school, although each school may develop its own strategies and activities for achieving the outcomes associated with those principles. These principles are closely aligned with the guiding principles we are developing for our organization as a whole. The non-negotiables are:

1. Positive School Culture and Climate
2. Physical and Mental Wellness for Every Child
3. Family Stability
4. Safe and Secure School Environment
5. Successful Academic Performance
6. Personal, Family, Community Empowerment and Self-Determination

![Community Schools Strategy Based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs](image)

**Figure 1: SWCOS’ Community Schools Strategy Based on Adaptation of Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs**

**Positive School Culture and Climate**

The National School Climate Council defines school climate as:

...the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’ and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (2015).

In some ways, it is almost impossible to separate any of our non-negotiables from school climate but, in a city like Baltimore where, according to Advocates for Children and Youth’s Kids Count Data Center (2015) 86% of Baltimore students in 2014 received free...
and reduced meals (in some of the schools SWCOS serves, the number of students qualified is much closer to 100%), and trauma, a close bed-fellow of poverty abounds, school climate deserves to be called out for special attention. It may be considered that school climate and culture provide an umbrella within which to house the other five non-negotiables.

The impact of trauma on children, families, and school staff in Baltimore is not to be underestimated. In an analysis of FBI crime records, Neighborhood Scouts (2015) cites a one in 70 chance in being a victim of a violent crime in Baltimore, compared with a one in 211 chance in the rest of Maryland. This is a high number for a city of this size. Baltimore also carries notoriety in the media as the heroin capital of the US. A short drive in some neighborhoods leaves little question that, whether the label is accurate or not, Baltimore has a very big heroin problem.

Children exposed to community violence are at a higher risk for mental health problems and acting out behavior in school (Hardaway, Lurky & Cornelius, 2014). Young people who have experienced this type of trauma often live in a constant state of arousal, anticipating that harm could come to them at any time (Martin, Revington & Seidat, 2012; Steinber et al, 2014). It is impossible to consider academic achievement for children who have experienced trauma without first reducing risk, enhancing social and emotional supports, and finally enhancing academic supports (Mulloy, 2014).

We have discovered that an important discussion about school leadership belongs in lock step with this discussion of school climate. Many in the education community have caught the vision about the pertinence of trauma and students’ (and staff’s) socio-emotional needs to student success, but we now understand that, without the driving force of school leadership, school climate cannot be improved. We have seen a marked difference in school climate between our schools where school leadership has been stable, consistent, and deliberate about creating an organizational culture built around a vision, which has been co-created with staff, students, parents and community members. This vision must be consistently messaged and reinforced throughout the school year, and must include opportunities for the entire school community to see how it benefits them.

Unfortunately, in some of our schools, the principals have changed yearly, and the new principals have only been vaguely familiar with the concept of community school, and have been overwhelmed with the tasks of becoming acclimated to a new school filled with students who are experiencing any number of challenges. In those cases, the concept of the community school is often seen as one more burden to deal with, rather than an asset to help overcome presenting challenges.

Organizational culture is a pattern of basic assumptions or shared meaning on which the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the people in the organization are based. It exists in groups of people who have shared (and solved) significant problems, observed the effects of their solutions, and have taken in new members. These basic assumptions are often unspoken and are highly resistant to change (Schein, 1987). Schools, like other types of organizations, require stable, consistent membership in order for strong culture to develop. A strong leader sets vision and absorbs the anxiety of group members, as culture is being created, embedded and reinforced (Schein, 2008). A revolving door of principals (and often accompanying faculty and staff) is destabilizing to culture, especially in schools where positive school culture has not already been established.

**Physical and Mental Well-Being of Every Child**

On our health sciences campus, health resources abound, but this is not the case for many residents of Baltimore City. According to the 2013 Baltimore City Health Disparities Report Card, the city “continues to experience higher mortality rates and burden of disease than both the rest of Maryland, and the overall US population”. In fact, the report cites a mortality rate for Baltimore City that is 1.34 times that of Maryland (p.5). The Health Department graded the city (which is almost two thirds African American) on health disparities between race, gender, education, and income, and gave the city a final grade of C minus.

In one of our schools, where the principal has set out and walked the community school vision for a long time, a close collaboration with the university’s dental school has made a huge impact on the dental health of the largely immigrant student body. In another of our schools the nursing school would like to work more closely with the students around asthma, which we believe impacts attendance, but bureaucratic processes about who can see children in the health suite have become an obstacle.

We would like to see a school-based health center in every school, which provides for children's physical and mental health needs. In one community
school, which we no longer support because they are strong enough to no longer need us, a strong principal and Community School Coordinator sought funding for a health center, on-site daycare and mental health center a multitude of other services for students and families. This school turned around from a school which was scheduled to be closed. Not surprisingly, this school is thriving. Again, it took strong leadership with a vision. It was not university-driven; we merely provided the resources to actualize that vision of the principal, teachers, parents and students.

**Family Stability**

Foundational to Maslow’s (1943) framework, is the concept that basic safety and physiologic needs must be met. This really is the bedrock of our community school work. The goal for Community School staff is to ensure families have opportunities to learn about resources they need and to identify themselves as in need of additional resources. SWCOS staff helps school staff identify child and family needs, which impact school achievement. Sometimes the issue presents itself through an attendance problem, which is an indication of a family’s homelessness or impending homelessness. Often school staff refer families for case management related to employment, housing, food and other needs. We have a separate program in SWCOS which provides case management and financial assistance to families at risk of homelessness, and that program sits in a community school, serving both families in the school and community members.

We have found that we cannot separate family stability from our other non-negotiables. We recognize that helping families find stable housing is insufficient if one of the parents has untreated mental health issues, or a medical issue and a job with no sick leave. Other barriers like family members who get job training, but are barred from employment by an old misdemeanor on their record have pushed us toward the importance of policy work and advocacy.

**Safe and Secure School Environment**

Much of this non-negotiable has to do with bullying and fighting between students. In some of our schools, fighting between students occurs daily and in some classrooms. It is not uncommon in one of our schools to have multiple fights erupt at the same time. Bullying is also a pervasive problem. Our Community School Coordinators work with school leadership on programs and activities, which end the bully-victim-bystander cycle.

The issue of safe and secure school environment is closely aligned with school culture and climate. The impact on all children of both overt aggression and being witness to aggression is profound. In schools where deliberate attention is paid by school leadership to peer relationships between adults, peer relationships between children and relationships between adults and children, schools are safer in perception and in reality (Cobb, 2014; Goldstein, Young & Boyd, 2007).

One of the difficult questions we have struggled with over the past two years is how to handle the issue of safety in our schools, especially when that safety might impact our own university students. We have had a few times when our own graduate students have felt unsafe; either because of events inside a school or in the immediate community. We wrestle with the question of when our focus should be service to the community versus the safety of our own university students. We are fully cognizant that removing our graduate students from their placements is an exercise of our privilege. The K-12 students who live in that community are not able to leave. Are they not equally at risk? We are also cognizant that coming into a community and then leaving when the going gets tough is exactly what universities have been doing for years; hence many communities’ distrust of institutions such as ours. And this type of perceived betrayal makes the work tougher for those who would come behind us, as they have a bigger mountain to climb in gaining the community’s trust.

In these instances, we have chosen (and received university clearance) to stay, even as some of our partners have left. We have been successful in staying each time, and hope that we will be able to weather each storm in kind. We believe that anyone who works in a traumatized system needs to recognize the impact of the trauma first. If a partner is coming in to teach reading, they should understand that they are coming to teach reading in a traumatized system. If they don’t want to deal with trauma, they should teach reading somewhere else. We will never be able to separate the trauma from the child (or from the school as a system). Until that reading teacher can work with that child, with all her trauma, that will be a very frustrated reading teacher. We have a lot of very frustrated teachers!

**Successful Academic Performance**

Assuming school climate is positive and supportive; children have good physical and mental health; families have all their basic needs met, and are in a stable and sustainable living situation; and children
feel physically and emotionally safe and secure at school, then children should be able to access the most rigorous academic material. This does NOT mean, that children who are not in perfect settings in all of the other non-negotiables cannot achieve significant academic success, and should not be met with high expectations for such. Molloy (2014) states that that #1 mistakes made by schools that serve at-risk students is neglecting the social-emotional foundations of academic success (the lower rungs of Maslow’s hierarchy). The #2 mistake, she says, is assuming that little can be done to help children who face many obstacles achieve academic success. At the same time that we address the transactional needs of students and families, the school's expectations should be clear: children can and will learn, and every adult in the building should carry the attitude and expectation of such.

This is easier said than done; we are aware. In some of the schools in which we work, staff are burned out and, sometimes themselves traumatized from working under trying conditions. It is often challenging for them to put away the tough outer shell they have to assume to keep showing up to do this difficult work. This is another place where leadership is important. Where the principal models for teachers his or her expectations for student learning, and relationships with students around academic achievement, significant strides can be made.

Personal, Family, Community Empowerment and Self-Determination

We trace many so-called “problem behaviors” of students and families in schools and communities back to the issue of disempowerment. In the same way that we would not want to work with a community organization that does not practice the community development principles of transparency, accountability, participation and inclusion, we find that these principles are not common practices for many schools. We understand that in many of the communities in which we work, the families have experienced generations of disempowerment, and suddenly becoming empowered at school will not solve all problems, but we believe this is a place to begin. Developing opportunities for student, parent, community, and staff voice to be heard is critical.

As part of this non-negotiable, Community School Coordinators encourage parents to identify issues about which they would like to develop campaigns; either in the school or in the community. This allows opportunities for civic engagement and social bonding around an issue. The goal is for parents and students to learn advocacy skills, and to gain the experience of being successful in asking for and gaining something to which they are entitled. The hope is that they will do this more and more in their school, in their communities, on their jobs. The sense of power gained from coming together with others and raising a collective voice is unparalleled. We want to show community members that, what they cannot achieve alone, they can achieve together. This creates incentives for many types of bonding found in healthy communities (Beck, Ohrner & Warner, 2012).

The Center for Positive School Climate and Supportive Discipline

As we work through our questions about community schools, SWCOS received funding to develop the Center for Positive School Climate and Supportive Discipline, fondly called, The Positive School Center. The Center was created to work with the Maryland State Department of Education to reduce the disproportionate suspensions of children of color and children with disabilities across the state. The goals of the Center are four-fold: to help teachers, staff and school administrators learn to: 1) View their schools through a trauma-informed lens; 2) Create classrooms which build resiliency with a focus on engagement, as opposed to behavior management; 3) Explore individual and structural bias and how these biases create policies which support disparate impact; and 4) Use restorative and healing practices, including the use of mindfulness for stress reduction and teacher self-care, and restorative practices for conflict management.

The use of tools such as mindfulness is steadily gaining momentum in schools, and appears to have significant utility in schools serving students experiencing trauma; helping to increase self-awareness and reduce stress (Mendelson, et al; Mulloy, 2014). Reduced stress allows individuals to enjoy more fulfillment (as SWCOS calls the peak of our adapted triangle): creativity, personal power, flow, positive relationships, and resilience (Conger, Conger & Martin, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, 2010; Wadsworth, Rindlaub, Hurwich-Reiss, Rienks, Bianco & Markman, 2013).

What We Have Learned

We have learned difficult lessons about our own internal capacity, which has led to some re-organization. Community School Coordinators working in schools with complex challenges require a lot of support, and this support was not built into our original model. In fact, funders do not provide support for this level...
of supervision, so we have had to figure out how
do so some creative fundraising to pay for it. We
have watched our staff in schools burn out without
it. We have created a new position: Director of
Community Services, and this position goes between
our community schools to lend support to staff and
interns in the schools. Our Director of Community
Organizing also provides support for activities related
to parent and student advocacy.

We have also learned that we made the mistake
of supporting schools at the request of community
partners or a funding source, or because it seemed to
make sense geographically. This has never worked.
If the principal does not have a burning desire to be
a community school, the program will not work. Our
new requirement is that the request must come from
the principal for us to consider it. We need to know
that there is leadership commitment. We have also had
principal turnover, where a committed principal leaves
and then received a new principal who had no interest in
moving the community school program forward.
This has always been devastating to the program.
Baltimore City Schools has a new system in place for
ensuring principals who will be placed in a community
school are committed to the concept, which will make
the process easier.

Finally, we have had to ask some tough questions
about our own effectiveness and organization as
a university supporter of community schools. As
we go through this strategic planning process, we
are articulating desired outcomes, strategies for
achievement and related activities. We are identifying
which indicators we can clearly measure, which are
within our control, and which are not. It is not enough
to simply say we did good work. We need to be able
to point to outcomes and say what we have achieved.

The Future

We want to bring together the full force of
our community schools, community organizing, case
management and mental health services, non-profit
capacity building, partnerships and graduate student
enthusiasm and energy to achieve collective impact
in the communities we support. Our vision is to
work within the community school ensuring that the
students, staff and families have access to the six non-
negotiables we have discussed. At the same time, we
want to work with families outside the school to have
a voice in their communities and a seat at the table
when local policymakers, developers, businesses and
institutions like ours, are making decisions. We want
to encourage families to tell their stories beyond their communities; at the state level and at the federal level,
to put a face on poverty and trauma. We want them to
know the satisfaction of no longer being faceless and
voiceless. We want young people to learn about and
exercise advocacy, and learn early not to be invisible.
We want to support partner organizations in growing
and becoming strong, so that they have better capacity
to serve families both inside and outside community
schools, so they are trained and equipped to work with
families experiencing trauma. We want them to be able
to stay in the game for the long haul, and not burn out
and give up. This is not a short journey.

We understand that nothing we envision will
happen quickly or come easily. We will see staff burn
out and school leadership come and go. But like any
organization, we know that a vision is a place to start,
and this is ours. We look forward to seeing how our
vision will mature and grow, and to what we will learn
along the way.

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