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The RFP for Community Schools occurred in the height of the pandemic in 2021. In the context of that crisis, with the vulnerabilities of our rural, high poverty, medically complex community at the height of mind, we created a vision for our NCSU proposal that relied on some really heavy leveraging of existing strengths. We looked to the aspects of our Supervisory Union work that emulated the characteristics we hoped to foster through Community Schools- the programs most nimble and responsive, most equitable, most capable of sustaining relationships of belonging and support for our students and families through what we all feared would become the most challenging period of teaching and learning that we had ever experienced as professionals.

One of the most obvious examples of nimble, equitable, and sustaining structures in our SU was and continues to be the Encore after school program. Even in the Spring of 2020, Encore, under Beth Chambers' leadership, made a quick pivot to provide daytime child care available to school and medical staff so that parents could continue to show up for the students, or their patients, during the day. It was one of the few programs that continued to open its doors to the community at that time. Concurrently, Beth and her staff planned for the return of in-person learning, and with it, in-person after school programming. And concurrently to *that*, Beth worked with our Learning Design Director to simultaneously launch an internal, NCSU virtual learning option for students who could not return to the classroom in 2020- incredible work done for the benefit of another population of students whose learning and health might have otherwise been at risk-- and, it included virtual after school clubs for kids.

In September of 2020 not only did NCSU Schools all return to in-person learning, so did *all* of the after school programs. It happened because of two things- Encore's incredible commitment to our students and their families, and their constant communication with families, school leaders, and the Department of Health- all of which was required to ensure that it could be done safely. That kind of connection only thrives in programming that is truly embedded, invested, and engaged in its community. It is *from and for* its community, and in rural areas, it has become a particularly rare, and still critical, key to student success.

As mentioned, our NCSU Community Schools pilot was developed in 2021, after Encore had accomplished all that. With Community Schools funding we found a new opportunity for collaboration between my work, formerly titled Equity and Community Outreach, where the integration of social services contributes to equitable access for all learners, and the Encore program. Our two offices were engaged in parallel work- making academic success possible by

supporting our schools to do work that is not traditionally included in the domain of public school- **resourcing families to help meet their basic needs through community engagement, and providing high quality, enriching, after school care.**

Clearly, NCSU Community Schools didn't need to build an after school program, and we didn't need to focus on making it better. What we did need to do was to leverage the incredible community resource that was the *existing model* and build it out in ways that would advance two primary goals : 1. To engage and strengthen the community as a whole- the community our students come from and return to each day; and 2. Ensure that our development of new programs for students and their families would result in increased access to safe, equitable and inclusive environments both within and outside our school buildings.

Through the NCSU Community Schools investment in collaborative programming with Encore, we have worked together to plan and implement expansion of programming that is building a foundation for recovery not only for our students, but for their families and community. We have endeavored to build the missing piece in many of our students lives- a resilient and connected community. Some of this work is presented in tandem, like the Youth GSA and Middle School Leadership groups that meet on Saturday's throughout the year to decrease the isolation of students growing up in rural, sparsely populated areas where it can be hard to find other youth who share the same concerns, hopes and ambitions.

In other areas, NCSU Community Schools has taken inspiration from Encore's model of expanded and enriched learning opportunities and turned those goals into dynamic evening education programming. Mobile Community STEAM and VanGO! Art night series invite folks of all ages to lean in and explore Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math, or engage in arts and craft-making activities together. Those programs exist one night per week for five weeks in one location, and then relocate to the next stop on the map so that a new group of people can be invited in for the same engaging activities. We feed people at these events. We make it as easy as possible for them to come join us, have a good time, and get to know each other and their school system in a new way. And when it's over we ask them to help us make it better, so that when we launch again in the next year they can see how much we value their presence, their participation, and the fact that they bothered to tell us what they think. We are seeing as many as 55 attendees per night at these events. And every participant who has provided feedback says that the programming absolutely fills the need for community learning and engagement and they wish it was available every week.

This is the kind of programming that Encore does so well for our children when their parents and caregivers are at work in the afternoon hours and summer time. And as it turns out, it's the kind of programming that our community also desperately needs to help rebuild the social bonds that began to diminish even before Covid, and made us more vulnerable during and after it.

In a place like the North Country Supervisory Union, not many entities are as well-situated to offer this wholistic approach to after school. In a place like this, the school has to be the one-stop shop for basic needs connections, after school care and enrichment, mental health

services, transportation and coordination for medical and dental appointments, access to laundry, because if we don't, the absence of those things will result in lost opportunities for learning, and diminished academic success. When a population relies on it's school to do all these things, the most valuable way to transform the relationship from dependency to collective efficacy is to build community resilience through social connection. It's a good thing that Covid forced us into that state of thinking, because we were right- we have entered what will likely be a long period of challenge, and we are doing a better job of being there for our students, their families, and our community because of it.