

Samantha Stevens

NCSU Community Schools Coordinator

The NCSU Community Schools team is unique among the pilot group funded by Act 67. We are a group of three people, including the Community School Coordinator and two outreach staff, who support all twelve of our supervisory union school communities to reduce barriers to learning and create opportunities for connection and engagement. We are funded by CS and by ESSER, and we have physical resources (a two-room family resource center that includes kitchen and laundry, and three vans) funded through a Congressional Earmark. The essential function of our team is to provide and facilitate programs within the five Community Schools pillars. All of our NCSU schools are community schools, because each is engaged in this work with dedicated staff and a sense of shared responsibility to our community. These schools are supported to further their work and ensure continuity of services by the NCSU Community Schools team. We are the force-multiplier for the Community Schools Pillars in our Supervisory Union.

When we applied for the Community Schools fund in 2021, we saw an opportunity to do work that we had known was needed for many years. This was the opportunity to expand services that were commonly available to students experiencing homelessness, our McKinney-Vento eligible population, to serve any student with material or case management needs. Until that time, the McKinney-Vento subgrant made it possible to provide emergency clothing, food, and other important materials- but it was only available to the MKV population. Yet, every year, schools would scramble to find the same resources for students who had identical needs in every way, except they were not experiencing homelessness. Where once the McKinney-Vento liaison was totally focused on the MKV eligible students and families, now we could provide resource and referral; supportive navigation and advocacy within the social services agencies

and organizations; and help families access school-based providers and understand school systems and policies regardless of housing status and based purely on need.

Community Schools allowed us to make this shift structurally as well as ideologically, expanding our team and also our mindset as we realized the extended effect on our students and their families of the intense COVID closure-period. In a further move to meet those needs, we began to pilot a grocery delivery service (in collaboration with our local capstone agency and rural transportation non-profit), to deliver essential weekly groceries to students who have barriers to accessing food. This is a highly replicable program, and one we believe has been well worth the effort of coordination and collaboration, at a relatively low price point.

In our office, there is significant expertise in the area of social service provision for the purpose of increasing student readiness-to-learn. An extension of readiness-to-learn, is “present-to-learn”, a recognition of the impact of absenteeism on student success. Like most school systems, we have long been working to understand and resolve the concerns that impact chronic absenteeism. Prior to the pandemic, we began a restorative truancy pilot program to re-envision our response to truancy, with the students and their caregivers at the center of the model. COVID, we know, exacerbated the “wicked problem” of truancy. I’m using the “wicked problem” definition of “A problem whose solution requires a great number of people to change their mindsets and behavior is likely to be a wicked problem.”

A restorative response to truancy requires both a mindset and behavior switch of multiple stakeholders and the student and caregivers involved. The Restorative Truancy pilot we launched under the Safe and Inclusive Schools pillar has paired expertise from our local Orleans County Restorative Truancy Team with SU-based staff who work directly with students to bring them back into school. We are seeing success with this work, and we also hope that our collaboration with the AOE and UVM to study the projects that emerged from CS may help us create a replicable model.

The NCSU has a well-established Encore program that creates Expanded and Enriched learning opportunities after school and throughout the summer. We have partnered with those

programs to increase availability of materials, boost service-learning opportunities, and increase our collaboration between the Community Schools staff and the Encore programming. For many districts, creating afterschool and summer programming through the Expanded and Enriched pillar has been an excellent way to use the funds to build capacity. The flexibility of this model allows each of the cohort participants to use the model and the funds to the best effect for their school/schools.

We have coordinated and piloted multigenerational programming in a variety of forms across the Expanded and Enriched, Active Family and Community Engagement, and Integrated Student Support pillars- from financial literacy and positive psychology classes for youth and adults, to community art classes and 0-5 playgroups. All of these answer the call of the community to increase opportunities for connection, and also emerge from needs assessment that told us that those specific opportunities could boost student and family success in another domain. Our learning through this process is leading us to prioritize certain opportunities over others- the art classes and playgroups are both examples of programming that I would recommend continuing to find funding for if the Community Schools funds end.

I started working for the NCSU in 2018 in the part-time McKinney-Vento liaison position. Within a year, because of our increased identification and enrollment in the program, the position became full-time, and the expanded role included support of students who are enrolled in Migrant Education and students who are English Language Learners. We were working to build our competence, collaborations, and resources to serve students who had more excessive transitions in their school experience and who faced additional social barriers to learning. In the past five years of my work in the NCSU, our McKinney-Vento eligible population grew from 13 students in SY 2017, to 111 in SY 2022. The ELL population grew from 5 students in 2018 to 23 students today. The need for additional human resources to help students and caregivers navigate and access academic and social services has grown. As we continue our process of developing, implementing, and learning from the NCSU Community Schools pilot, the focus on meeting basic needs will continue to be the strongest thread in our work.

As we have quickly realized in the two years of this project, the need for belonging, community connection, and coordination of unique, fun, and family-centered activities will be the framework through which we can best meet our students and ensure their success in school and beyond. The five pillars of Community Schools are a useful framework for organizing our approach. We hope that other schools in Vermont will be offered the opportunity to learn about and apply this model to their own schools and communities, and we are grateful for the enormous support Jess DeCarolis has provided to us in our initial efforts. We would be glad to participate in future actions that further the Community Schools model in Vermont.

[NCSU Community Schools Evidence](#)