

VERMONT ACT 67: THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ACT

Evaluation Findings and Recommendations from Three Years (2021-2024)
of Community Schools Implementation in Rural Vermont.

POLICY BRIEF

February 2025

BACKGROUND

Supported by a federal ARP ESSER allocation, informed by national research and lessons learned from previous state policies, the Vermont State Legislature passed Act 67 - The Community Schools Act - in 2021.

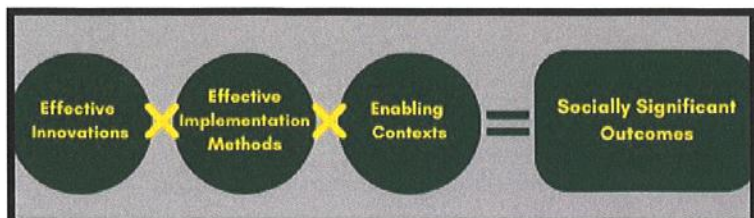
This act set aside \$3.4M dedicated to the development and implementation of the Community Schools approach to facilitate the post-COVID reopening process and mitigate learning loss due to the pandemic. Upon passage of Act 67, the VT Agency of Education rapidly established a competitive grant opportunity for eligible applicants to develop and pilot the Community School approach.

Five schools and supervisory unions across Vermont were awarded funding to implement the Community Schools approach:

- Cabot School (PK-12; Cabot, VT)
- North Country Supervisory Union (PK-12; Newport, VT)
- Hazen Union School (7-12; Hardwick, VT)
- Vergennes Union Elementary School (K-5; Vergennes, VT)
- White River Valley Middle School (7-8; Bethel, VT)

EVALUATION PROCESS

The Community Schools implementation evaluation process was guided by an Implementation Science framework, which provided a 'formula for success' comprising the following: Effective Innovations, Implementation Methods, and Enabling Contexts. **When these elements are present and combined within an implementation process, Socially Significant Outcomes are achieved.**



EFFECTIVE INNOVATIONS

In the case of Vermont Community Schools, two primary elements coalesced to create the spark and motivation to implement the Community Schools approach and to redefine "how we do school."

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MINDSET

The Community School Mindset refers to a perspective, way of thinking, or disposition related to the multifaceted work required for implementing Community Schools. The CS Mindset considers ways that students, families, educators, and communities, can all benefit from, engage with, and easily identify with the CS approach, and centers on ways to make the CS approach adaptable and sustainable in various community contexts.

A CS Mindset implies the presence of:

- Adaptive Leadership Skills
- Strengths-Based Perspectives
- Relationship Oriented Mentality
- A Focus on Systems Change
- Growth Mindset

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IDENTITY

A specific goal of Community Schools implementation evaluation was to elucidate ways in which Vermont Community Schools were defining, messaging, and branding the term "Community Schools" to various stakeholders both within their schools and their local communities over time.

Two key insights emerged related to answering the question "What Are Community Schools?" that go beyond the presence of the five pillars outlined in Act 67:

- **Community Schools as a framework is a realization of several decades of education reform that, at a systemic level, is an expression of Vermont values and goals regarding "how we do school"**
- **It is imperative to center schools and communities as drivers of defining Community Schools through implementation efforts from the ground up, versus a top-down approach with pre-determined definitions and outcomes that can push school communities to the periphery of that process**

ENABLING CONTEXTS

Similar to communities and schools across the country, many Vermont schools experienced a loss of school identity, community connection, and their sense of what school was and who it was for after the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the particularly challenging timeframe in which Act 67 was enacted and launched, what became clear was that ***the Community Schools approach could and did contribute to the development and expansion of a new narrative around schooling, educational identity, and connection between school and community.***

At the local level, awardees were candid about the conflicts they felt between complying with myriad rules, regulations, policies and procedures that govern every level of operating a school (from CBAs to insurance policies to state regulations and beyond) and this new freedom or flexibility to 'try things out' - what we described as a 'loose - tight tension'. The flexibility and support inherent in the approach to implementing Community Schools both allowed awardees to acknowledge conflicts or barriers as well as, together with AOE and University partners, to work through whether conflicts/barriers required local, regional, or state solutions. ***The flexibility and support inherent in the Community Schools approach allowed schools to acknowledge and speak to this tension, while still feeling empowered to try new things and have time and space to navigate the new, challenging circumstances of educational leadership today, as well as the unique opportunities such circumstances present.*** This flexibility was bolstered by the participatory and supportive accountability framework established by the VT Community Schools Research-Policy-Practice Partnership (RP3) comprised of the VT Agency of Education, the University of Vermont, and the five VT Community Schools.

Implementing Community Schools in rural contexts required considering intersecting leverage points connected to other progressive educational policies that support the five pillars of Community Schools. In doing so, Community Schools created space to knit together a tapestry of educational policies that helped to avoid initiative overload and conflation. ***This enabling context highlights and supports the flexibility and adaptability inherent in CS structures and methods, that allow schools to learn what the most pressing needs of students and community are and pivot to prioritize pillar work that supports those needs. This then activates or triggers other work, programming, or leadership initiatives that center on or prioritize different pillars.***

Figure 1. Pillar Sequencing in White River Valley Middle School



Lastly, the way this grant program was built and managed by the VT AOE intentionally created opportunities for connection, collaboration, and social capital development across the state. ***This purposeful development of a Community of Practice helped to counteract the isolation many school leaders experience, providing a collegial and supportive network where school leaders and State Education Agency, and University partners could connect and learn from one another.***

SOCIALLY SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES

VT Community Schools **supported immediate food assistance to many communities in Vermont that had limited food access through grocery delivery programs, establishment of food pantries at school, providing students with food and meals on the weekend and during school vacations.**

Community Schools **acted as generators and protectors of their community through renewed and expanded collaborative partnership and shared identity through fostering community-based 'institutional memory'** that remembers and honors the legacy and previous identities of a community, while allowing for natural evolution and identity growth.

Community Schools were **pivot-ready organizations that foster adaptability and nimbleness in the face of significant community needs (e.g., natural disasters).** Through the focused establishment of networks, connections, and working relationships between various entities that exist within a rural community, channels of communication and resource distribution were already in place and available for communities to turn to in times of great stress and upheaval (e.g., flooding).

VT **Community Schools showed evidence of deeper learning across the lifespan, via Community Schools serving students, educators, families and communities through holistic supports** that leverage local assets, including:

- Intergenerational Mentoring
- Project Based Learning
- Increased Afterschool, Summer, and Out-of-School Learning
- Youth & Family Engagement Practices, Programs
- Professional Development and Learning Opportunities

VT Community Schools **engaged in intentional inclusion of student/family voice in the planning and management of services, programming, and opportunity within CS visioning, activities and planning;** Used restorative, equitable, and inclusive practices to increase opportunities for dialogue and engagement with both students and their families, building trust, and shifting perspectives on schools/public education.

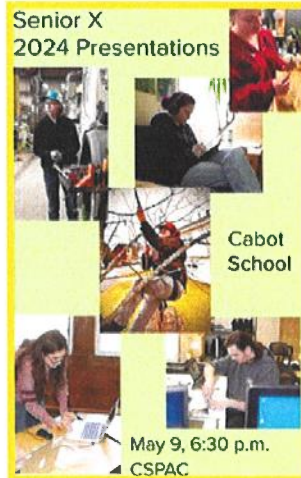
VT Community Schools **funding and partnerships provided services to students that may have not been eligible for federal social safety net programs, based on definitions and criteria, enhancing overall health and wellness of students, families, and communities.**



Students at Vergennes Union Elementary preparing fresh produce for weekend backpack program & community food bank donations.



Students at Hazen Union School learning bicycle maintenance and mechanics in partnership with local business and Lamoyille Valley Rail Trail.



High School Seniors from Cabot School presenting on Senior Experience (SeniorX) Project-Based Learning Program.



Early Childhood Education students and families in the North Country Supervisory Union participate in the NCSU 'Art Van-Go' mobile arts lab.



White River Valley Middle School students participate in community-wide reads with elders from the local community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data Infrastructure Recommendations

- **Invest in a statewide school climate survey so that Community Schools and all schools can track and measure key outcomes** that are centered in the Vermont portrait of a graduate and evidenced-based indicators for school effectiveness, educator well-being, and positive youth development.
- **Compile and disseminate localized documentation efforts of CS implementation strategies and activities so that schools engaging in the coordinated CS implementation can track inputs, activities, and resources** so that a comprehensive understanding of the investment required to initiate and sustain a CS model in Vermont may be elucidated.
- **Establish a streamlined mechanism for data sharing across AOE-funded CS sites so that CS implementation data may be integrated with existing school-level data** currently administered by the AOE including MTSS survey, education dashboard, statewide longitudinal data system, continuous improvement plans, and comprehensive needs assessments.

School-Level Recommendations

- **Cultivate the Community School mindset within Vermont principals and superintendents. We recommend VPA/VSA engagement and partnership to support professional development for principals and superintendents related to the Community Schools approach and alignment with leadership characteristics.**
- **Community Schools are effective public branding for schools. The complexity of schools can be more easily understood through the Community Schools language and model. We recommend aligning school and district strategic planning efforts and public communication with the Community School approach.**
- **Effective and sustainable Community School implementation requires coordination and collaboration across various levels of LEA leadership including CS coordinator, principal, superintendent, and school board. We recommend CS site-based leadership teams, if constructed at the school building level, actively involve district and school board leadership in CS planning efforts and communication strategies.**
- **We recommend providing professional development and training materials on Community Schools to the Vermont Superintendents Association and the Vermont School Boards Association so there is a baseline understanding of the history and current landscape of Community Schools implementation in Vermont.**

State-Level Recommendations

- **We believe that a state-level commitment to maintain, sustain, scale, and support Community Schools should be an imperative of the Vermont State Legislature given the values and goals of Act 67 outlined in 2021,** which provide an organizational structure and localized braiding map for existing educational policies and systems-wide, community-based efforts focused on positive youth development, well-being, community resiliency and academic rigor.
- **Funding alone was not the singular driver of the success and growth of the five awardees that received Community Schools funding. We recommend that the State of Vermont provide the necessary structures to ensure supportive accountability of schools and districts engaged in implementing the Community Schools approach. This includes staffing, resources, technical assistance and inter-agency support of Community Schools implementation that align with AOE supported grant programs and initiatives.**
- **Given the pivotal role of the Community School Coordinator in organizing and liaising with community partners, school/district stakeholders, families, students and administration, we recommend exploring a state level endorsement for the role of the Community School Coordinator. An educator endorsement pathway for a CSC will help codify the roles and responsibilities of this position, and provide state level support and professional development opportunities that are aligned with the position.** The CSC endorsement pathway might also create an opportunity to strengthen educator workforce development through a "grow your own" initiative as several of the Community School coordinators from the Act 67 awardees were community members or previous school employees under different roles.

Policy Recommendations

- **State-level policy provides an opportunity to consider how different policy and regulatory structures can coordinate under the Community Schools approach. We recommend adopting Community Schools as an umbrella framework that serves to anchor many of the goals, outcomes, and programmatic threads dedicated to supporting children, youth, families and rural communities across state level committees and agencies (e.g., AOE, VDH, Workforce Development Committee).**
- **We recommend advancing Community Schools as a coordinated state level structure to integrate multiple funding sources across state agencies so that LEAs can predictably access and apply for funding opportunities and receive coordinated technical assistance and support to integrate inter-agency state funding sources to support a comprehensive Community Schools ecosystem in Vermont.**

Prepared by the **Catamount Community Schools Collaborative (CCSC)**,
a Vermont Community Schools Research-Policy-Practice Partnership between:



Vermont Community Schools:

Cabot School
Hazen Union School
North Country Supervisory Union
Vergennes Union Elementary School
White River Valley Middle School



The CCSC is financially supported through several federal, state, professional, and university funding mechanisms:

- The Vermont Agency of Education and Federal ARP-ESSER funds for Act 67 Community Schools Implementation Evaluation
- The University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships (LIRP)
- A Congressionally Funded Community Project (CFCP) through US Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education
- The National Education of Research Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) Youth Voice 4 RPPs Award

FEBRUARY 2025