



How 2020 might be the year of community schools

BY REUBEN JACOBSON, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/29/20 04:00 PM EST [95](#)

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Education remains a priority for many voters ahead of the 2020 election, despite what has been most often discussed on the presidential debate stage. Issues like health care are taking up much of the election conversation, but an argument can be made that high-quality education may be the most effective preventative measure for poor health. Community schools are one strategy for addressing better educational outcomes and the other results we want for the whole child, such as better health and civic and career preparation.

It appears likely that if one of the leading Democrats wins the November presidential election, community schools will receive a major boost. While each candidate has called for greater investments in education broadly, this is the first election where the top candidates have all made promises to expand the federal role in community schools.

Community schools, which have grown significantly across the country over the past 25 years, are centers of the community that address the cognitive, emotional, physical, and psychological needs of a child. Working with a variety of results-focused partners, these schools empower families, youth, and communities in making decisions together with educators. Efficiently braiding funds from multiple sources, community schools provide the strategy and the infrastructure for bringing support and additional resources to schools.

And they work.

A recently released study on New York City Community Schools by the RAND Corporation found that chronic absences and disciplinary incidents are down, average math test scores have improved, and high schools have seen an increase in the number of credits accumulated. While this is significant, we must build on it.

The origin of New York City Community Schools could be illustrative of what's to come if a Democrat wins. In 2013, New York City mayoral candidates visited Cincinnati, Ohio, to see their

community schools (called Community Learning Centers) in action. Each walked away inspired and committed to include community schools in their education plans for the nation's largest city. No matter who won, community schools would become some part of the new education reform strategy. Bill de Blasio followed through on his promise, and there are now 267 New York City community schools.

I'm encouraged that each of the leading presidential candidates has called for more community schools. Looking across the top candidates coming out of the first primaries, the promise for community schools has been consistent, even while the specifics around funds and scope vary. All of the leading candidates, from Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) to former South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg to Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), have committed to further investing in community schools through their education proposals.

Community schools are not an alternative to charters or other "education reform" strategies. They focus on academic results by using integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices. They represent a transformation of schools using a whole child, whole school, whole community strategy that provides fertile ground for impactful implementation of additional interventions.

A challenge the Democratic nominee will face is the scope of community schools expansion given resource constraints and many competing priorities. However, Congress has increased its support for the Federal Full Service Community Schools Program (FSCS) from \$5 million annually in 2009 to \$25 million in the 2020 fiscal year. This support comes in spite of proposed elimination of the program in each Trump budget, including his most recent. The FSCS program has received support from both Democrats and Republicans since it was created in the George W. Bush administration.

In the education policy space, there is an ongoing debate on the most urgent priority. The community school plans candidates are proposing offer an opportunity to bridge the conversation between academic rigor, poverty, and health. If we are to solve our most intractable problems, we need political leaders who offer solutions that bring people together and support all of our students, families, and communities.

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