

Community Schools in Tennessee

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Community schools are public schools that form partnerships with community organizations and use additional staff to meet the educational, physical, and emotional needs of economically disadvantaged students, families, and communities. Students and families are connected through community schools to a broad range of services, including food and clothing assistance, mental health treatment, academic enrichment, and adult education.

A 2014 state law required OREA to study the formation and operation of community schools in Tennessee, analyze whether such schools have met their educational and operational goals, and identify any best practices.

The formation and operation of community schools

OREA identified at least 100 community schools in Tennessee for the 2018-19 school year. Site visits were conducted by OREA at 17 community schools located in Davidson County, Hamilton County, Knox County, and the Achievement School District in Shelby County. Based on site visits, interviews, and a comprehensive review of research on community schools, OREA identified six common elements that make up the community school operational model: wraparound services, a community school provider, a site coordinator, regular needs assessments, community partnerships, and integration within the school. The full report provides a detailed explanation for each of the six elements.

Tennessee law outlines parameters for a community school grant program, but no funding has been allocated for the grant, and no other state funding is specifically dedicated for community schools. Community schools combine public funding from local, state, and federal sources with support from private sources to cover their operational costs.



Have community schools met their educational and operational goals?

The 2014 law required OREA to examine the effect of community schools on student learning, family engagement with the school and community, dropout rates and graduation rates, and the physical and mental health of students and other members of the community. Based on rigorous evaluations from other states and self-reported data and examples from some schools in Tennessee, community schools may improve outcomes in these four areas.

OREA could not, however, draw comprehensive conclusions about the effect of community schools on outcomes in these four areas for several reasons. The lack of a common evaluation framework used by all community schools, the absence of uniform and consistent data, and the variation among community schools in length of operation, goals, and priorities pose significant barriers to conducting a state-level evaluation of community schools. Policymakers may wish to consider establishing a state-level framework for evaluating community schools and the degree to which rigorous internal evaluation methods are used by the community school sector.

Best practices for community schools

OREA's report considers several best practices for community schools such as broad-based support for the community school model from all school staff, meaningful and strategic partnerships between the school and community organizations, and tracking data on community school performance.