

Organizing a Site Visit

Inviting policy makers to visit your community school is a powerful way to help them understand the value your program brings to the community. The future of community schools lies in the level of commitment that public officials make to fund programs. By hosting a site visit, advocates can help raise awareness of the importance of community schools in your community and the need to keep this work strong in Illinois.

Elected officials spend time in their districts frequently, including when Congress or the General Assembly is in session. In Illinois, for example, General Assembly members are often in their districts on Mondays and Fridays, and on breaks in the session (this year, “spring break” is the weeks of 3/31 and 4/6). Times when elected officials are in-district provide great opportunities to organize a site visit.

The following steps provide a guide to schedule and carry out a successful site visit.

✓ Step 1

- Contact your legislator. Most Congressional Senators and Representatives have more than one district office. Select the office closest to you. General Assembly members usually have one office in their district.
- You can access their contact information by using the following sites:
 - Illinois State Board of Elections District/Official Search (<http://bit.ly/1My8Koi>)
 - The U.S. Senate’s website (http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm),
 - The U.S. House of Representative’s website (<http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/>)
 - The Illinois General Assembly website (<http://www.ilga.gov/>).

✓ Step 2

- Identify a few dates during the next Congressional or General Assembly recess when you could host a tour of your community school, and send an invitation.

✓ Step 3

- Call the district office. Tell the scheduler/legislative aide that you would like to schedule a tour of your community school for the policy maker to attend.
- Be flexible. Provide options for dates and times if your first selection does not work. If a policy maker is not available, see if a staff person can make the visit instead.
- Keep in mind that elected officials’ schedules can change without notice. Several days before your scheduled visit, call to confirm the site visit and have alternate dates in case you need to reschedule.
- Remember also that sometimes an elected official will not be able to participate in the visit, but a staffer will. Staffers are responsible for sharing information and making recommendations to elected officials. They play important roles, and it can be very impactful having a staffer participate in a site visit as well.

✓ **Step 4**

- Before the visit, identify youth, parents, program staff, school officials and community partners who would be convincing spokespeople for your program.
- Once you have identified the spokespeople to represent your community school, give them any background material you have on the policy maker so they will feel comfortable meeting them. This is a good opportunity to share the schedule of the site visit and clarify their roles.

✓ **Step 5**

- Congratulations! It's the day of the site visit.
- Have a fact sheet on your school to give to the senator or representative. Include information that demonstrates the reach and impact your community school has on children, youth, their families, and the surrounding community.
- Take pictures of the visit!
- After the visit ends, send a thank you letter to your legislator for attending the site visit.

The Federation for Community Schools is here to help you with legislative site visits. The Federation can take care of visit logistics and preparing any materials to distribute during the event. If you are interested in organizing a site visit at your community school, contact the Melissa Mitchell at melissa@ilcommunityschools.org or at (312) 836-0854.

Site Visit Checklist

Being an effective community school advocate requires building strong relationships with your senators, representatives, and their staff. Some tips to keep in mind while you prepare before, during and after your visit with your policy maker.

Before your Visit

- ✓ Scheduling
 - Schedule individual or group visits with your elected officials.
- ✓ Prepare
 - Treat this as an important meeting by preparing in advance. The mark of a successful legislative visit is leaving the legislator with a good sense of why you were there.
- ✓ Do your Research
 - Learn about your elected official's priority issues, and the committee on which he/she serves.
 - Bring statistics and facts about your community school/organization.
 - How can your official's support help your community school?

During your Visit

- ✓ Arrive Early
 - If you are running late, call and let them know.
- ✓ State the Purpose of your Visit
 - Tell your elected official who you are representing (community school/organization), and what the purpose of your visit is.
- ✓ Make it Local
 - Connect the issues you are discussing to what is happening with your Senator or Representative's state and district. Explain how your community and the policymaker's constituents are affected and how community schools address these issues.
- ✓ Listen, Respond, and Don't Argue
 - Your elected official might agree with you – that's okay! Identify issues of concern or differences of opinion and respond based on your knowledge and experience.
 - Be positive and firm. Legislators generally want to help.
 - Tell the truth. Credibility is critical to a successful relationship.
 - In a team visit, work with your colleagues, allowing all to participate.
- ✓ Wrap Up the Meeting
 - The entire visit should not take longer than 20 minutes
 - Summarize your key points and positions
 - Leave fact sheets, other information relevant to community schools, and your contact information.
 - Don't forget to thank the elective official for their time!

After your Visit

- ✓ Follow Up
 - Send a thank you letter. ([See Sample Thank You Letter](#))
- ✓ Keep the Federation for Community Schools informed
 - Let the Federation staff know how your visit went and where your elected official stood on the issues you discussed.

Sample Schedule and Timeline for Site Visit¹

The following tools are intended to help you plan and coordinate your site visit successfully before and during the site visit.

Schedule – Day of Site Visit

Time	Activity
3:00 PM	Legislator/Staff arrives at the community school and is greeted by Principal, Program Coordinator, or other lead host. Have a fact sheet available to distribute. Don't' forget to have your camera ready to take pictures.
3:05 – 3:15 PM	Lead the Legislator/Staff on a tour of the school. Choose areas that demonstrate the impact of your community school on the academic, social, health and well-being of your students. Walk the tour yourself in advance to make sure everything is in order and that you deliver your intended message.
3:15 – 3:30 PM	Introduce Legislator/Staff to the children/youth in the program. Have them talk about their experience at the community school. Inform participants of the message you are conveying in advance so they can be prepared and supportive.
3:30 – 3:45 PM	Facilitate a discussion between parents and Legislator/Staff. Ask parents to explain how the programs and services housed at the community school helps their families.
3:45 – 4:00 PM	Have the school Principal or Resource Coordinator talk about school-wide improvement attributable to the community school. 4:00 PM - End of site visit. Follow up with a thank you letter.

Timeline

Time Prior to Visit	Activity
1 month	Invite Legislator/Staff to visit your community school. Be prepared to have various dates you can suggest. Follow up with a formal invitation via email, mail, or fax.
3 weeks	Invite parents, community members, school officials, and youth to participate in the site visit.
2 weeks	Develop schedule for the day; identify roles for spokespersons.
1 week	Finalize program agenda. This includes tour of the community school and supporting materials you will be giving the Legislator/Staff. Meet with other people who will participate in the visit (teachers, parents, students) to discuss what role they will play, what they will talk about, what they want to share about your community school work, and what they need to tell their stories.
3 days	Call your Legislator's office to confirm visit.
2 days	Invite media, if applicable.

¹ National Afterschool Alliance <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/reachPolicySiteVisit.cfm>

Sample Thank You Letter (After Visit/Phone Call)

The Honorable **(full name)**
(Room #) (Name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative **(insert name)**:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me **(include date)** to talk about the importance of supporting community schools in Illinois and in your district **(include district number/area)**. As we discussed, and as I have witnessed firsthand community schools keep children and youth safe, increases academic achievement, and helps working families. **(Include any statistics/information about your community school/organization)**

I look forward to meeting with you again to further discuss the ways in which we can work together to ensure the ways in which we can work together to secure funding for community schools **(or include specific bill/issue discussed)** throughout the state.

Sincerely,

(Name, Last Name)
(Contact Information)

[Insert Logo]

[Insert Header/Program Name]

[Sub-Header A: Quantitative Data]

Use this space to highlight quantitative data about your community school.

The point is to quickly grab the attention of a politician, parent, or funder with key data points that underscore the need for and success of the program.

If you do not have data for your program, you can find nationwide and state-specific data on our website

www.ilcommunitieschools.org, or the Coalition for Community Schools site, www.communitieschools.org

For more information, contact

Your Contact Name

Address Line

City, State, Zip

Phone

Email

“Insert a quote from a student, parent or other stakeholder that reinforces key program goals and/or outcomes”

[Sub-header B: Community Needs & Program Overview]

In this section, you may include a sentence or two on the needs in your community:

- Number of children who utilize the programs and services at your community school.
- Number of parents involved
- Benefits of the community school in your community

Briefly highlight how your program addresses these challenges, and include your mission statement.

Add a picture!



[Sub-Header C: Program Details]

Include facts about your program. Describe the impacts of your program that may include social/emotional benefits or increased engagement in learning.

You can also include:

- Partnerships
- Program accomplishments
- Area/Community served

Community Schools FAQ

Q. What is a community school?

A. A community school provides meaningful developmental and enrichment opportunities for students and families beyond the typical school day and year; mobilizing all the assets their communities and stakeholders have to offer. These wraparound services available through community schools provide students with programs and services that remove barriers to quality learning and provide enhanced opportunities that directly contribute to better academic performance, higher attendance rates, and improved physical and mental health. Community schools are comprehensive, and implementation and sustainability vary across the board. A community school is not only an out-of-school time program for youth; rather it is the product of a school and a community working collaboratively to support students and families. Overall, community schools enable early, comprehensive development that prepares children to be vital, contributing members of the community throughout their lives, and engaged parents and community members that build safer, stronger, and more self-sufficient neighborhoods.

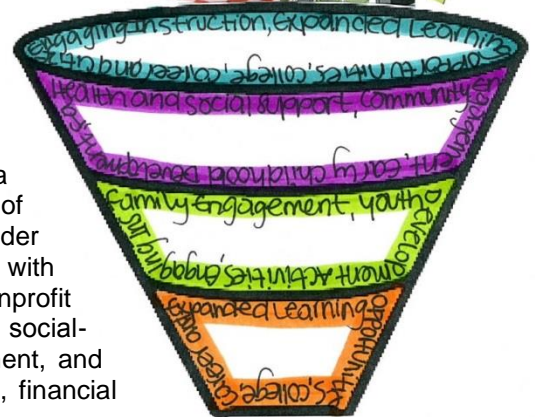


Q. Who is involved in a community school?

A. For a community school to work, public schools, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses come together, using the school as a hub, to provide a broad range of programs and services to students, their families, and the community at-large.

Q. How does a community school work?

A. An essential component of a high quality community school is a full-time Resource Coordinator (RC) who is charged with meeting the holistic needs of students, families, and the community. RCs coordinate and maintain a number of resources using the school as a point of access for students and families. We use a funnel as a metaphor to help represent the important work RCs do to connect all of the services and programs students and families need to flourish under one roof: the community school. These resources, often funded with blended private and public dollars and offered through nonprofit organizations, include programs that support students' academic and social-emotional development, activities to promote family/parent engagement, and services that may otherwise not be accessed like health screenings, financial education, and employment and training programs.



Q. What programs/services does a typical community school offer?

A. Community school program offerings vary based on local needs and resources. Community schools also engage parents as partners in their child's education, and provide supports to ensure they are able to do so. The strategy is flexible, ensuring the needs and assets of each community are considered. However, most community schools will offer programs and services in the following categories to all students, families, and community members: Out-of-School Time and Summer Programs; Early Childhood Resources; Tutoring & Mentoring Programs; Mental Health Supports; College and Career Guidance; Arts Programs, Academic Supports & Enrichment; Healthcare and Social Services Supports; and Employment and Training Assistance.



Q. How are community schools funded?

A. Community schools braid funding provided by local, state and federal grants, which serve as a foundation to implement the community school model. Because public sources of funding are not sufficient to fully support a community school, additional funding from foundations, local business, and corporations supports the work of community schools. Having a stable funding source that supports community schools will allow for this initiative to grow and for schools to offer more comprehensive programs and supports to students and families. Specifically, partnerships are essential in the current economic climate. With budgets under continued threat and challenging economic prospects, schools must build deep and intentional relationships with community partners to expand learning opportunities.

Q. What challenges do community schools face?

A. Despite the demonstrated success and benefits of the community school model, funding for community schools continues to be limited. Community schools are expected to respond to increasing needs (like mental health supports) with decreasing resources, and schools too are forced to do more with less as their budgets continued to get squeezed. Though community schools have proven to be an effective and efficient use of public and private investments, they face increased stress and pressure as funding for afterschool programs, social services, and the foundational funding for a community school Resource Coordinator gets cut. These cuts also impact supports and limited resources available to provide these critical supports to students and families. Under these challenging and uncertain economic times, Resource Coordinators are expected to offer students and families more expanding learning opportunities after school and during the summer months. To support the community school movement in Illinois, government officials can promote policies that support the growth and strength of community school model, as well as secure funding necessary to sustain and expand community schools.

Q. Why are community schools important and how do they support academic achievement?

A. Although schools are responsible of providing quality academic programs to students during the day, research has demonstrated that academics alone is not enough to ensure student success, rather a more comprehensive menu of programs and services are needed in order to create optimal learning environment and a strong, vibrant community. Community schools are necessary because they help address the many challenges schools and educators face in underserved communities, including poverty, under resourced schools, and unstructured time. Emerging evidence in the field of education and youth development demonstrates that community schools can contribute to student academic progress as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, and overall GPA. Ultimately, a student's success (or failure) is the product of multiple and varied factors at the individual, family, and school levels. Community schools play an active role in providing a number of academic and non-academic supports and services that target all the needs that contribute to a student's achievement gap.

Q. How many students are impacted by community schools?

A. Community schools serve more than 1.5 million students in nearly 3,000 elementary and high schools across the United States. In Illinois, there are over 175 community schools across the rural, urban, and suburban areas and many more in the early stages of development. Community schools are led by over 60 lead partners including nonprofit agencies, community-based organizations, and in some cases, the school district itself.

Q. How can I learn more about community schools?

A. For additional information, including current community school members in Illinois and how you can support the work of community schools, visit the Federation for Community Schools' website: ilcommunityschools.org. The Federation for Community Schools is a member coalition that works to **amplify the voice** abilities of community schools by creating a network to strengthen their collective impact, promote policy changes that support community schools, and provide professional development opportunities for individuals in the field.