



Out of a Crisis Comes Resilience: Community School Coordinators Work Through the Pandemic to Generate Social Capital in Baltimore's Neighborhoods

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Abstract

The global pandemic was traumatic for everyone, and it revealed the vast inequity in public services to which people have access. Fortunately, community schools had been coordinating services to meet the needs of their families prior to the pandemic, and when schools closed in 2020, they kicked into high gear to provide for those needs. This paper reports on interviews with 15 community school coordinators in Baltimore conducted at the end of the pandemic period to find out how they went about meeting community needs. Findings indicate that coordinators played a crucial role in getting families' basic needs (i.e. food, shelter, clothing) met, but they also built trusting relationships, generating social capital in their neighborhoods set in racially segregated neighborhoods as a result of decades of redlining and policies meant to isolate Black communities. In the end, this paper argues that community school coordinators need more support to convert the social capital into further advocacy alongside the families with whom they work.

Keywords Community schools · Social capital · Pandemic

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to meet students' out of school needs became even more obvious. The nation shut down, and schooling went online. It was clear that online instruction was inadequate, as teachers reported staring at lots of blank screens and students reported being disengaged, (Government Accountability Office, 2022). Without in-person schooling, many children would not only be disengaged in learning, but they would also go without meals, physical and arts education, counseling, and special education services. In other words,

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existing inequities produced by the deeply-rooted systems and structures of racism and classism were only exacerbated by the pandemic, (Schwartz, 2021).

Through this disruptive time, community schools, public schools around the country that address the out-of-school factors which adversely impact students' ability to attend and perform in school by providing supports like access to physical and mental healthcare and housing and employment support services, rolled up their sleeves and found ways to deliver food, toiletries, hotspots, and other supplies to the families that they served, (Blank, 2005; Oakes et al., 2017). Learning on already-existing partnerships and building new ones, community schools stepped up and provided almost immediately in some cases after schools shut down in March 2020 (Oakes et al., 2020; Shiller & Hunt, 2021).

Community school coordinators worked overtime during the pandemic—driving to deliver boxes of food and doing home visits to find out why students have not showed up to virtual school, for example. These individuals tried to do what they could to address the lack of services and infrastructure with which families contended. Shaia argues that the work of community schools addressing immediate needs is “transactional,” which indicates just meeting the basic needs of families, (Shaia, 2016). As she writes:

A transactional approach to planning and programming focuses on the long-term quality and sustainability of essential services that must be provided continuously. For example, this includes efforts to keep food pantries stocked and accessible, provide winter coats and other clothing when necessary, arrange health and dental care for those who are suffering, offer financial coaching to families during tax season, and meet emergency housing needs for those who've had to leave their homes. Such transactional services are absolutely critical, as they are meant to ensure day-to-day survival and stability for children and their families, (p. 56).

Shaia contrasts this approach with a more “transformative” one, which would go beyond this and build collective leadership, engage in community organizing and get to the root causes of the problems producing the needs in the first place. She urges that after those basic needs are met that coordinators support communities in transformation.

Of course, meeting “transactional” needs is no small feat. Without a pandemic, this requires careful planning and coordination to supply food, clothing, medical care, laundry, and other basic services to families and students, especially in hyper-segregated communities, (Massey & Tannen, 2016). In pre-pandemic times, community school coordinators (CSCs) expended a great deal of effort to bring these resources to schools in a city like Baltimore, the location of this study, in which close to 25% of the residents live in poverty, and over 80% of students attending its public schools qualify for free and reduced price meals (US Census Bureau, 2020). Community schools, therefore, played an important role in addressing many of the basic needs of families and community members before the pandemic.

When schools closed at the start of the pandemic, CSCs were unable to provide resources for families in the same way. For families who relied on the community

schools, this was an additional crisis. Consequently, this study asked: 1. To what degree, in the absence of functioning services and institutions, was the community school coordinator (CSC) able to step in and support the families and students they served? and 2. How did the service provision provide opportunity to build connections, relationships, and social capital to do the more transformative work that scholars of community schools suggest they do? Using data from interviews conducted with community school coordinators in Baltimore in the summer of 2021, this paper explores the degree to which community school coordinators met both the basic and transformative needs of communities. In the end, this paper argues that the conditions of the pandemic provided a testing ground for just how strong the community schools model is, and the possibilities and limits of the role of the community school coordinator.

Conceptual Frameworks

Community Schools: Catalysts for Social Capital and Community Change

Community schools operate around four pillars of community schools are as follows: (1) integrated student supports (i.e., wraparound services such as healthcare), (2) expanded learning opportunities (i.e., out-of-school programs that support student learning), (3) active family and community engagement, and (4) collaborative leadership among educators (i.e., principals and teachers) and between school and community stakeholders (Oakes et al., 2017). Their theory of action is that by mediating the impact of outside factors (i.e. poverty, health factors, neighborhood effects) have on learning, community schools can improve academic achievement (Dryfoos, 1995; Blank, 2005; McLaughlin et al, 2020; Johnston et al. 2020).

While there is evidence to suggest that community schools do indeed contribute to improved academic outcomes, the idea that community schools only amass partnerships to address those outside factors impeding academic success has been criticized. Shaia and Finigan-Carr (2018) call this out as a limited understanding of what community schools could be, only focusing on the basic needs of communities like food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and employment (Shaia & Finigan-Carr, 2018). They hope that community schools move beyond meeting basic needs to helping build power in communities so that they can advocate for deeper investment in their communities so that the service provision is not the only function of a community school.

Meeting those transactional needs is where community school coordinators (CSCs) start, however. They conduct needs assessments of the families and the neighborhoods. Using that data, they engage in the process of amassing a variety of public and private partnerships to meet those needs. Community schools scholars, Sanders et al. (2019) have identified the coordinator as a “critical nexus” between the school, partners, and parents (p. 94). Through this time and effort building connections, coordinators become people who are on the pulse of community needs, constantly interacting with families. This is relational work, which can create the conditions for supporting not only the families connected with the school but

supporting the neighborhoods and communities more broadly. As Bierbaum et al (2022) write,

In addition to being sites of learning and development, community schools often connect youth and families to a broad range of health and social services, serve as centers for older adult learning, recreation, and other cradle-to-career programming, (p. 3).

Put another way, the relational work of the coordinators provides the base for getting at the more transformative needs of communities, or the “the esteem and belonging needs” which enable communities to build power and advocate on their own behalf, (Shaia & Finigan-Carr, 2018).

Community Schools in Baltimore

The move to get schools to open their doors beyond regular school hours, and to become community schools with a system of supports in Baltimore began in 2003. With assistance from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, an entity called Baltimore Community School Connections, a nonprofit which launched 23 community schools, was born. In 2005, the mayor invested city funds in the strategy (Shiller et al, 2020). Baltimore’s Community Schools Connections employed a model aimed at improving public schools, and for the most part is still in place today. The model included a “lead agency” who partnered with a school, and hired a community school coordinator who was tasked with bringing in and coordinating partners to provide wrap-around services, such as medical and mental health services, after school programming, and support for those experiencing housing and employment instability.¹ Their work grew, and by 2010, community schools became officially housed under the umbrella of the local management board that remains the main intermediary organization for many of the community schools in Baltimore today. This iteration of community schools rested on the idea of assembling a series of partners to provide services that address barriers families and children have, which was a selling point for local non-profits, funders, and government.

One reason for that was the magnitude of the needs in a city like Baltimore. Concentrated poverty created a constant crisis for those working with schools and families, and staff were looking for ways to combat the immediate problems that arose from it. By 2018, Baltimore had 50 community schools, and five major lead agencies that partner with community schools across the city. The community schools grew further under new recommendations by a state level commission to create a more equitable funding formula for Maryland’s schools. One of its key recommendations was the expansion of community schools in high poverty schools. Following the commission’s recommendations, the state legislature passed a bill, called

¹ The Baltimore community schools are just one version of the larger community school strategy which is in effect in many states across the United States. One of the oldest programs, Communities in Schools, has a similar model and is present in much of the South and mid-West. More information can be found here: <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/>

the Blueprint for Maryland Schools, to provide funding for the community school. With the new legislation, Maryland made a groundbreaking investment in community schools and Baltimore was able to ramp up its community school effort to about 130 community schools, almost all schools in the city. Baltimore's school district established an official community schools policy in 2023 and has staff dedicated to community schools in the school district office.

Trust, Social Capital, and Social Cohesion

At the school level, Bryk and Schneider (2002) have argued that trust is an essential element in the success of a school. Within that framework, trust between families and schools is essential. Schools characterized by high levels of relational trust between families and schools are much more likely to experience sustained improvement in student academic achievement, and teachers and administrators in these schools are likely to be more committed to students' learning. Trust is the basis for growing social capital, from which community schools can meet the transformative needs of their families, (Mayger & Hochbein, 2021).

Educators, including school administrators, and community school coordinators play key roles in strengthening social capital between schools and communities, (Galindo et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2019). However, community school coordinators are pivotal in this process as they are:

The bridge between parents and the larger society. Because they are so isolated, there is no other place where their children can access the enrichment programs, so provide it here or a connection to it. A lot of our community school has been filling enrichment holes, health holes, and social service holes, (Galindo et al., 2017, p. 150s).

Ricardo Stanton-Salazar also uses the idea of social capital to refer to resources and forms of support that we can access through our genuine relationships with people who care, (Stanton-Salazar, 2016). Race and class play a clear role in the degree to which one has social capital, and leaning on institutional agents who have the power to broker relationships and build capital is critical. Stanton Salazar states:

For one individual, their social network is one important way they experience privilege: access to people in power, access to many forms of resources and support, and the means which they exert a greater deal of control over their lives. For another individual, their social network becomes a social prison that denies him or her access to the most basic forms of support, (p. 2).

Consequently, a community school coordinator, for example, can expand or contract social capital depending on the degree to which those "power brokers" are conduits to social capital. Their real contribution is making connections and expanding the network of students and families to build their capacity for making change in their own lives and in their neighborhoods. However, there are threats to social capital too. For example, given the intergenerational poverty that families experience, families can have little hope. Community schools must, therefore, address feelings

of cultural marginalization or unequal access to resources, or otherwise the ability of social capital to accumulate and ignite larger community change will be negatively impacted, (Galindo et al, 2017). Shaia and Finigan-Carr (2018) argue that this is complex and time-consuming work, but given the nature of the challenges facing people in areas affected by intense poverty and segregation, there is no choice but to embrace that complexity (p. 18). Some community schools embrace the complexity. Butler et al (2022) studied community schools across Baltimore and found that there was the potential for community schools to serve as catalysts for community development when schools and their partners have a clear vision for community-facing work. When engaged in the community-facing work there is “potential for school-community partnerships to catalyze community development,” (p. 11). Community schools engaged in the work at this level are laying the groundwork for collective power, leadership, advocacy, as well as collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012).

Method

In the context of community schools, I was primarily interested in understanding what role the community school coordinators played in meeting community needs during pandemic. I have worked with community schools for many years, sending my undergraduates as interns to work under the supervision of community school coordinators to learn the value of family and community engagement. I have long known the work of community school coordinators and the value they bring to their school communities. They coordinate partnerships, support families and students, and are the heartbeat of their schools in most cases. In the pandemic, they played an even more vital role, and when a coordinator called me to ask if I could assist distributing boxes of food to families that her school served, I knew that they were essential workers. Consequently, I wanted to document and understand how this played out during the pandemic. In particular, I wanted to understand: To what degree, in the absence of functioning services and institutions, was the community school coordinator (CSC) able to step in an support the families and students they served? Was the community school coordinator (CSC) only able to fill the space with service provision or were they able to go beyond that and build connections, relationships, and social capital to do the more transformative work that scholars of community schools suggest they do?

This was a traditional interview study. I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with community schools coordinators during the summer of 2021 (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). These coordinators came from schools in every corner of the city, from elementary, middle, and high schools. They represented every corner of the city. I asked the following questions:

Describe the neighborhood you work in.

What were some common/frequent needs that needed to be addressed with students and families as a result of school closures?

How were needs addressed? Can you provide some examples, specific needs like for technology and food?

Discuss the ways in which you have reached out to students who have not been attending. What are the obstacles, as you see them, for students?

How have you leveraged partnerships to serve students and families? Have they been adequate?

To what degree are you working to build power among families and community members so that they can advocate on their own behalf? (Table 1).

With the interview data, I conducted a thematic analysis based on what emerged from all of the data sources. As in any interpretive study, data analysis was ongoing and iterative. I began by reviewing collected data from interviews and developed a coding scheme through an “open coding process,” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 143). A set of themes emerged from the data that became codes during the analysis and in turn became the coding categories for the data. These codes were helpful in defining how the community school coordinators saw the needs in the communities that they served and how they met those needs. The coding process was then followed by a series of memos generating “grounded theory,” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I shared these memos back to coordinators for “member checks,” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Examining the data from the BNIA database allowed for discursive analysis to see if that squared with their experience of the communities that they were serving, and, more broadly, to understand the connection between the themes and their corresponding evidence (Emerson et al., 1995).

Findings

Community school coordinators play a vital role in their schools, securing partnerships and the resources to address the basic needs of communities. Amassing partnerships and resources was a key part of coordinators’ responsibilities before the pandemic. They would create relationships with partners based on a needs assessment conducted in their school communities which asked families, primarily, what kinds of services they needed. However, during the pandemic, those partnerships became a lifeline for many communities.

The pandemic context ramped up the work of coordinators. They leaned heavily on existing partners to do supply or provide direct resource distribution for families. Additionally, coordinators were in daily communication with families and students to ensure that they were attending school and had what they needed at home to survive the pandemic. Lastly, because of their role as liaison between families and schools, coordinators were thrust into elevated leadership roles alongside the school administration so that they could keep the school leaders abreast of what was happening in the school communities. According to survey data from Baltimore City Schools, coordinators’ efforts to provide food and technology to families increased exponentially. One CSC reported: “This job, right now, is far removed from what most of us set out to do. I think many of us are struggling with finding joy and reward in their work, and in many ways, our work has become more difficult, and the stakes have become higher,” (Shiller & Hunt, 2021). Through it all, coordinators deepened their connection with partners and families.

Table 1 Community school demographic information

School level	Neighborhood	Community demographics: Race	Percent of families in poverty (%)	Coordinator demographics: Race and years at school
High School	Curtis Bay	35.8% Black, 31.4% white, 24% Hispanic	32	White, 13 years
Elementary/Middle	SouthernPark Heights/Dorchester	90.9% Black	30.3	Asian, 10 years
Elementary	Middle East	77.5% Black, 8.7% white, 5.3 Asian	41.4	White, 4 years
Elementary/Middle	Armstead Gardens/Claremont	53.2% Black, 22.8% Hispanic, 18.8% white	20.5	White, 4 years
Elementary	Patterson Park	59.9% white, 25.8% Hispanic, 6.4% Black	7.8	White, 15 years
High school	Clifton Berea	89.9% Black, 2.9% white, 3.9% Hispanic	17.2	Black, 5 years
Elementary	Cherry Hill	89.1% Black; 4.1 Hispanic	38	Black, 5 years
Elementary/Middle	Upton-Druid Heights	88% Black	43.5	Black, 4 years
Middle	Bel/Air Edison	86.2% Black	18.9	Black, 13 years
Middle/high school	Hampden	71.8% white, 9.5% Black, 5.1% Hispanic	3.7	White, 5 years
Elementary	Greater Mondawmin	87.5% Black, 3.8% white, 2% Hispanic	34.6	Black, 7 years
Elementary/Middle	Howard Park	89.5% Black, 3.5% Hispanic	9.7	Black, 3 years
High school	Harford/Echodale	58.8% Black, 30.4% white	4.8	Black, 5 years
High School	Forest Park	89.8% Black, 3.6 white, 2% Hispanic	15.9	Black, 8 years
Elementary	Bel/Air Edison	86.2% Black	18.9	Latinx, 8 years

Source: Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance

Three key themes emerged in interviews with coordinators: (1) Laying the groundwork: Building trust by meeting community needs, (2) Building social capital: Maintaining student and family connections, (3) Developing neighborhood capacity. These findings were an interesting counter-balance to the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (BNIA) data because just looking across schools at the community profiles, we can see needs and community deficits but not assets or the ways in which communities are working to meet the needs of residents. Moreover, the findings suggested that community schools are not only working on meeting the basic needs of families, but the community school coordinators, in particular, laid the groundwork for more transformative needs to be met by building social capital networks and a shared sense of purpose among a variety of agencies and non-profit organizations working with the community schools.

Theme 1: Laying the Groundwork: Building Trust by Meeting Community Needs

Meeting community needs in such a coordinated pre-dated the pandemic and grew out of decades of racial isolation and poverty. One of the coordinators spoke to this in his interview when discussing technology access:

Cherry Hill was built as a segregated community for Black folks during World War II, there has never been the investment in infrastructure to support broadband and high speed internet. There has been very limited investment in the community in general, with housing that dates back to that 1940's period, only listed bus service between the neighborhood and the rest of the city, and no supermarket. Therefore, the families and children, therefore, have limited access to economic, educational, political opportunities, built into the geography of where they live. The community school coordinators act individually to try and meet the needs, but we are acting individually to address decades of disinvestment and racial isolation (Personal communication, James Henry, July 18, 2021).

Coordinators knew that the needs they were addressing were long standing, but they also knew that making connections and building relationships was going to be critical to getting their communities through the pandemic. They were acting as a "critical nexus" between the school, partners, and parents (Sanders et al., 2019, p. 94).

The pandemic ramped up the CSCs' efforts exponentially. They made sure to reach out to every family and to address their needs as quickly as possible. Immediately after schools closed in March 2020, they took inventory of what the families needed including: food and grocery items, technology, economic stability/housing/eviction prevention, and childcare. Prior to the pandemic, community schools had been meeting community needs through services food pantries, after school programs, and mobile dental clinics, for example. However, the pandemic exposed an even deeper need than coordinators previously thought, and schools became a go-to for almost everything. All of the coordinators reported that there were thousands of meals served, weekend backpacks, clothing, grocery items,

diapers, baby wipes, and other toiletry items distributed. By working to meet those needs, the CSCs were demonstrating care, a foundational element to building trust. As Mayger & Hochbein (2020) note, community school coordinators show care through responding to the family needs (p. 215).

Driven by care for families CSCs amassed partnerships to ensure that their school buildings could become distribution centers. Sometimes these partnerships were makeshift, through a trusted resident who had a key to the church in the neighborhood where supplies were stored and could open the space whenever a community member for family needed it. Other times this was widely publicized planned effort with volunteers coordinated to give out household supplies, produce boxes, winter coats, and school supplies. One school set up a “store” twice a week where families could come get groceries, clothing, and toiletries. Coordinators reported that families came out in “relatively large numbers,” which made this a good time to verify phone numbers, emails, and other contact information with families, helping to populate their databases with information they did not necessarily have prior to the pandemic. Coordinators also went to families’ homes to visit and make sure students were doing well. No matter how it happened, the community school became a place where the school community (and the larger community beyond just the families at the school) could go to get necessities during the pandemic for free.

There were tremendous economic and health needs across communities. Many parents were working throughout the pandemic in jobs like driving trucks, cleaning homes and offices, working in hospitals to keep money coming in, but this work put them all at risk for COVID. Another consequence of this was children left home alone. As coordinators visited homes, which they were not required to do, they reported finding young children were left at home to navigate virtual school alone or with siblings sharing devices. Reports of fifth graders taking care of toddlers or even teens looking after multiple children during the day while their parents went to work in places like hospitals or at Amazon which remained open “put added pressure on those kids,” according to one coordinator. Coordinators connected with these young people regularly and tried to make sure they were able to continue their own schooling while looking after their siblings.

Yet, many of these issues were compounded in Baltimore’s immigrant communities where there was a language barrier, concerns about immigration, and confusion about how COVID spread. CSCs did what ever they could to find childcare but with everyone on edge at the height of the pandemic, this was challenging. One CSC set up a childcare center in one room of their school building when it was safe to do so. This lifted a lot of pressure off of young children caring for siblings during the work day, which families appreciated since they were not able to afford this themselves.

Other CSCs set up bi-lingual tech help, virtual classroom support, and general communication in Spanish. They networked with the other community schools serving non-English speaking communities to meet the specific needs of their families who also had to contend with language and immigration issues. While immigrant families may not have felt comfortable at the public school prior to the pandemic, by offering help the CSCs were able to build trust. As evidence of this, one CSC who was an immigrant herself reported that she leaned on that identity and her Spanish language skills to overcome hesitation among the families in her school community

when the school building became a vaccination site in 2021. She stated that "families who were disengaged (due to language barriers) came out in numbers" to get their first and second shots, which they were not doing everywhere.

Technology was another area of need. Thousands of laptops and hotspots were distributed from the school district, but many families did not know how to use their new devices or did not know how to navigate the multiple platforms, including zoom. Schools set up "genius bars" and helplines to help families, but still they found that families struggled to navigate technology that they were not used to using daily. Families came out to the outdoor technology help stations regularly for assistance.

Many coordinators talked about how their work was born out of necessity during the pandemic. As one declared, "Whatever you need, it's in the house. We can help ourselves, the district does not have a specific plan, we are accustomed to this," (personal communication, Jennifer Grimes, July 20, 2021). Another coordinator discussed the system she created for communication and outreach for the distribution of supplies which built a network where one did not exist. She said,

We used word of mouth through each kids to find all students which worked. 'Hey, you haven't logged on in three days, what's going on?' Then did door-to-door, emails, texts. Uber offered free rides to school to pick up laptops, which we shared on Instagram. We organized a Wednesday/Saturday food distribution, not on school grounds until September, but the local church allowed food distribution in their parking lot. Got donations to give out masks, PPE, hand sanitizer, Coppin State and CVS helped with flu shots, clothing donations from Old Navy; We R Us as partner to provide dairy and meat. Each week was something new. Eight of us were out there every week and now we have 25 volunteers, students came to get service learning hours or wanted to get out of the house. Zip codes from all over the city come; No fliers, Facebook live to tell everyone that they were there; People coming to the church continued coming, (Personal communication, Sandra Ramos, July 10, 2021).

Through the process of getting those needs met, coordinators were increasingly seen as reliable and caring at a time of crisis. This is evidenced by the increase in numbers families coming out to receive food, clothing, and toiletries, for example. One coordinator indicated that there was a marked increase, and reported that because of the outreach they did as a school, they were able to distribute over 300 boxes of fresh food weekly, and over 1000 families were served every month.

Through this as well as all of the other ways the CSCs provided services to their families, they were able to show consistency and care or their families, foundational to building trust between schools and their larger communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mayger & Hochbein, 2020).

Theme 2: Building Social Capital: Maintaining Student and Family Connections

"We know where everyone is," a community school coordinator relayed. She articulated what so many of the coordinators took as their real mission: the

community school needed to be a place for people to keep in contact, meetup, check in, and maintain a social network. Another coordinator said, “We worked to connect with 100% of families, even if they were in El Salvador, California, or Texas. We did not give up!” Indeed, community schools were key sites for building social capital. (Galindo et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2019). The coordinators did outreach prior to the pandemic, but in the pandemic, they stepped up outreach to families through social media, home visits, and wellness calls. They did not let anyone get lost or give up on families. They found everyone who had not been in regular attendance or contact with the school, and kept spreadsheets of up to date contact information for families gathered through engagement like home visits or food pantry pickups. As one coordinator put it, “We are building the path and keeping communities alive,” (personal communication, Laura Brimm, August 3, 2021).

Some families moved out of state or out of the country, while others were home, but had serious needs. With that information, CSCs mustered the resources of their partners to step up and provide for the families, and never let anyone “through the cracks.” The constant communication was reassuring for families, and kept the trust coordinators had built prior to the pandemic. As another coordinator said, the pandemic “helped the school staff see kids as a part of families and understood kids’ situations; they saw how home stuff can impact learning, which they were not seeing before,” (personal communication, Amanda Washington, August 3, 2021).

Coordinators at high schools made sure that students did not give up on their education. Hearing that high schoolers went to work for the local Amazon distribution center to help their families during the pandemic, coordinators created advisory systems and evening school programs so that the students could graduate. Another school kept up constant virtual workshops in areas like cooking, art, and science and offered virtual field trips to museums to make sure that students stayed positive and engaged. Coordinators worked around the clock.

When they were not online, they were delivering supplies to families, keeping positive energy, and gathering vital information about what communities needed. Through this work, coordinators knit together a social network. As one coordinator conveyed:

Community schools have changed lives because through the relationships people can get services in their communities that they need to survive and thrive, the authentic human connection is powerful. As an immigrant, I understand and am the first point of contact for many of them, (Personal communication, Kelly Jones, August 1, 2021).

Coordinators were instrumental in keeping humans tied together. Keeping in contact with families and students allows humans to connect with the community school and potentially with each other, a pre-requisite for working on transformative needs of the community. Community organizing and building power is predicated on the relationships that the residents have with each other. Coordinators were central in building and maintaining the relationships at the base of this potential for “social bonding and collective power,” (Shaia & Finigan-Carr, 2018, p. 16).

They understood that building the social network in communities was imperative to building power. This meant going to beyond building trust between the school and the families, but even working through racial tension among families and community members in neighborhoods as well. As one coordinator working in the Armstead-Gardens neighborhood explained about the community:

It's a vibrant community, but the white population voted republican and they control neighborhood association. Many of the Latinx families are undocumented and cannot vote, so the white and Latinx families do not necessarily get along— you hear white families say things like my 'Mexican neighbor took two bags from the food pantry,' and when there is conflict, white families have threatened to call ICE. The white families not seeing how hard Latinx families work, often 3 jobs often to be as productive as they are and they are not super vocal because of immigration and language concerns. But because of the door knocking and rapport with community school coordinator, that is changing. The local church run by Ms.Doris, a Puerto Rican woman who has been living in the neighborhood for 20 years, also helped change that. The church was a distribution zone. She would open it up any time of day/night because it was walkable, and those white families started to see Latinx people as helpful (personal communication, Leslie Knight, August 5, 2021).

There is clearly more work to be done in this community, but extreme conditions of the pandemic created a situation in which everyone needed help. That vulnerability may have opened people up and made people more empathic, but the community school coordinators engaging in door knocking went a long way as well to building the pathways of connection across racial difference.

Stanton-Salazar (2016) suggests that race and class play a clear role in social capital networks, and while he refers mainly to the race and class differences between school staff and families and students, his idea can be applied in this example. That is, no matter the context, race and class differences need to be bridged in order to expand social capital networks. In fact, ignoring those differences can prevent social capital from growing (Galindo, Sanders, & Abel, 2017). In Armstead-Gardens, the community school coordinator helped broker race and class differences within the neighborhood, a critical step for expanding the social capital network of families and ultimately building power in the community.

Theme 3: Developing Neighborhood Resource Capacity to Advocate for Themselves

An area of growth for the community school coordinators is in developing the capacity of families to advocate for themselves. Building power among families goes beyond meeting basic needs and gets at the transformative needs of communities so they can be self-sustaining, (Shaia & Finigan-Carr, 2018). While CSCs were very skilled at developing partnerships, and delivering services, there was less evidence that the community school coordinators were engaged in the capacity-building of families.

Sometimes coordinators took the role of advocate on themselves, even if it was not a sustainable practice. One example of this was a coordinator's effort to get Wifi for the community she served. She reported going beyond just creating partnerships when she saw this need, and engaged in advocacy when she saw the deep need in her community for Wifi. This coordinator made the attempt, after disappointing attempts by Comcast to provide discounted internet, to get Wifi for the whole Southwest Baltimore community in which she worked. Her lead agency, the organization who employed her to work as a community school coordinator in Baltimore, purchased Comcast codes so that people had free internet throughout the community, not just the school. However, the coordinator's vision was to get a satellite dish built on top of the school building to broadcast wifi to the whole neighborhood. She worked with the school's partners as well as city agencies to try and make this happen. She wanted the city to make wifi more of a public utility, but did she fell short and attributes this in part to being so busy doing the daily work of meeting basic needs in her community. She lamented,

I found myself loading boxes, running the school store, or coordinating the food pantry. It's not a good use of my time. If I have to do everything then we can't get grants or advocate for better service. How can we really be the hub of our community if we can't do this work? (personal communication, Shelly Davis, August10, 2021).

She found herself concluding that there is not enough "infrastructure in order for coordinators to help advocate on behalf of the community and the school." While this example illustrates that there was indeed for potential for the community school to ignite community power, the coordinator did not see herself having the time and energy for galvanizing the community to advocate.

In another instance, in a more isolated part of Baltimore, there were four community schools serving the area. The coordinator found that joining forces was the pathway forward. This worked to make sure that the neighborhood had access to as much as possible, including haircuts, laundry services, and food pantries. "Community schools and partners stepped up and very gratifying, which is nice but we still need to tug on people's shirts to get resources," the coordinator pointed out. In his case, the coordinator still saw it as her job to deliver resources, but not to enlist families as leaders in advocating for more neighborhood resources.

Consequently, while the CSCs service-delivery was showing signs of building trust among families, and were building social networks, they had not gotten to the stage of building power among the families. Community school coordinators did not necessarily see their role as community organizers, and in some cases were discouraged from engaging in that work. One coordinator reported that her lead agency told her not to do any community organizing. Others simply reported not receiving any messages one way or the other about community organizing. To get to that stage of neighborhood transformation, as Shaia and Finigan-Carr suggest, CSCs would have to work with families in a new way, not as just recipients of services but as potential leaders and advocates.

Discussion

The work can seem never-ending for community school coordinators. As of this writing, three of the coordinators have left their positions, suggesting that there is a limit to the amount of work for which community schools coordinators have capacity. As one coordinator explained, “I have done more home visits than I have ever done, second hand trauma is taxing and exhausting.” This burnout was especially pronounced due to the pandemic.

However, it is clear from this study that community school coordinators have been building trusting relationships and weaving social capital networks. Of course the next step would be to transition the work of meeting basic needs into transformative ones: Power-building, organizing, and community change. That step will require further training for community school coordinators and other school staff to fully understand what community organizing looks like, and how to harness it in order to reckon with the havoc caused by the pandemic on top of decades of disinvestment. Scholar Lawrence Brown (2021) explains that community organizing is a way to build power in Black communities and to ensure that “Black neighborhoods matter,” (p. 179). Community organizing has already taken off as evidenced by increasing numbers of residents who come out for the annual taxpayer night in Baltimore to demand that funding for policing be decreased in favor of more investment in housing and social services.

Another critical finding is that if community schools aspire to transformational work, meeting the daily need and building the social networks cannot fall to one person. Community school coordinators have developed the relationships and identified local family and community members who can become those leaders, but mechanisms need to be created to ensure that those leaders can have a voice in advocacy and transformation. As Shaia and Finigan-Carr (2018) write, “Local community members must be motivated and empowered to stand up, criticize the status quo, define the changes they want, and act,” (p. 17). This kind of effort will go a long way to getting to transformative needs of communities. That is not to say that there does not need to be structural changes to counteract the decades of dispossession and displacement, but through the organizing and standing up to power, communities can demand change (Brown, 2021).

To that end, I propose a new heuristic for community school coordinators that draws from The National Center for Community Schools, which has developed a continuum of what community school development looks like (Campo, 2023). No such continuum exists specific to the work of the community school coordinator, so I adapted it, based on the findings of this study. My hope is that this can be a framework on which the work of the coordinator is reimaged (Table 2, 3).

Conclusion

While neighborhood conditions undoubtedly influence the community schools, they are not destiny. Communities can change, and community schools have the power to transform them. Community schools can be hubs for resources and social connection, built on an ethic of love, “an act, rather than a feeling, in which we openly

Table 2 National center for community schools continuum of community school development

Emerging	Maturing	Transforming
Community school advocates, school leaders and partners begin to organize people, data, and community resources, and identify needs and community assets such as, including champions of the strategy, such as local leaders and partners	Youth, leaders, and partners co-construct and align initiatives with vision and goals, assess impact, and formalize structures for continuous improvement	Community school creates sustainable practices, relationships, and policies with the entire school community, and braiding and blending of funding supports growth and long-term planning for collective impact

Source: National Center for Community Schools Children's Aid Society (2022)

Table 3 Proposed continuum of community school coordinator development

Emerging	Maturing	Transforming
<p>Laying the groundwork for trust: Community school coordinator conducts a needs assessment, begins to build relationships with families and community members, develops an understanding of community assets and needs and begins to meet them by providing services through partners in collaboration with school staff</p>	<p>Building social capital: Community school coordinator formalizes partnerships, continues to provide services to meet community needs, creates mechanisms for feedback, and maintains relationships with students and families, begins to identify youth, family and/or community leaders; develops the capacity of school staff to support community school services and coordinator efforts</p>	<p>Continues the work in the previous stages and adds developing neighborhood capacity: Community school coordinator sustains relationships, co-leads with students, families, and community, leverages social capital for larger community change, develops a strategy for advocacy leaning on the other staff members at the community school</p>

and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust” (hooks, 2000, p. 14). Community school coordinators enact this ethic of love through their work. Having their ears to the ground, they develop ways to assist their communities and show care and commitment.

Community school coordinators’ work goes beyond service-delivery. In communities which have faced disinvestment due to systemic racism, their presence can build trust, which is fertile ground for further transformation. Community school coordinators are the “plugs,” the connectors, people on which family and community members can rely for help in a crisis. After the crisis subsides, they can build on that foundation to catalyze neighborhood change.

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