

Creating Safe and Supportive Schools:

# A Community Schools Model at Work



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By Joseph D. Fantigrossi, EdD

The challenges faced by our school systems today are unprecedented in their scope and intensity. In many districts, schools have become the hub of the community, providing not only for the students' academic needs, but for their social, emotional, and physical needs as well. In order to find success in such a complex environment, it is critical to systematically access and utilize resources both within and outside the walls of our schools. Several districts in Wayne County, NY (including Lyons, Sodus, North Rose-Wolcott, and Clyde-Savannah), are doing so by following a community schools model.

Wayne County Community Schools, under the leadership of Jay Roscup, aims to “support the development of culturally responsive trauma-informed community schools that integrate school and community resources to provide evidenced-based and restorative practices organized by a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).” This statement encompasses what we consider to be the major components of intervention on behalf of our young people:

- 1) Culturally responsive,
- 2) Trauma-informed,
- 3) Community resources,
- 4) Restorative practices, and
- 5) MTSS

In our experience, most districts are doing a wide variety of positive work with their students and families, often in isolation, not connected to a broader goal or organized for maximum effectiveness and efficiency. The community schools structure allows us to do so.

The Coalition for Community Schools (<http://www.community-schools.org/>) says: “Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities.” This is a movement away from schools acting alone and towards active partnerships with community entities. It includes practices as diverse as parent workgroups, therapy provided by outside agencies, oral care from local dentists, and support from neighborhood literacy organizations, often within the friendly confines of the school building itself.

Culturally responsive practices focus on equity, in all its forms. We have worked extensively with Dr. Bryant Marks from Morehouse College around the concept of implicit bias, which he defines as “varying degrees of stereotyping, prejudice and/or discrimination below conscious awareness in a manner that benefits oneself or one’s group; it involves limited or distorted perceptions of others. It is everywhere and affects everyone. We are all biased.” It is our goal to increase cultural competency, expand understanding of issues related

to diversity and inclusion, and deliver professional growth opportunities for all members of our school community. We have been supported in this work by the Family and Community Engagement Program, under the umbrella of the New York State My Brother’s Keeper initiative.

Creating trauma-informed and safe and supportive school environments has been our work of the last three years. Utilizing the research of Dr. Bruce Perry and Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, along with our collaboration with Leslie University and the Trauma and Learning Policy Institute, we have worked to spread awareness and implementation of trauma-sensitive practices across over 30 school districts and more than a dozen conferences. Moving the conversation from “what is wrong with that student?” to “what happened to that student?” has been a critical shift in the journey of empathy for educators. The ARC Framework, developed by Margaret E. Blaustein and Kristine M. Kinniburgh, in *Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents*, provides us with three primary domains of intervention to organize this work. We consider a child successful when they have become proficient in attachment, regulation (self), and competency.

A key component of our model is community partnerships. Many of the school districts of Wayne County have cultivated relationships to meet the diverse needs of their students. This includes, but is not limited to, organizations that provide the following: Family, relationship, and substance abuse counseling, social work services, emergency housing, food pantries, physical and mental health supports, parent/adult education, mentoring, and many other services. Additionally, community members volunteer their services in our schools, providing a much-needed extra set of hands or a smiling face for our students and teachers.



Restorative practices represent our most recent work and integrate seamlessly with our work on cultural-relevancy, trauma-informed care, and MTSS. Dr. Tom Cavanagh of Restorative Justice Education ([www.restorativejustice.com](http://www.restorativejustice.com)) has worked closely with us to implement a train-the-trainer model of restorative practices in our region. Dr. Cavanagh’s mission is “to establish caring relationships through the implementation of a culture of care in schools, with the goal of helping ethnically diverse students to flourish.” The focus of this work is on building a strong, vibrant community that repairs the harm caused when schoolwide expectations are not met. This represents an exchange of the traditional philosophies of punitive responses to misbehavior for a “whole-school, relational approach to building school climate and addressing student behavior that fosters belonging over exclusion, social engagement over control, and meaningful accountability over punishment.” (The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue)

While utilizing culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and restorative practices is critical to supporting our school community, we need to organize these practices to maximize their impact and avoid the pitfalls of working in silos. MTSS drives this work in our school districts. Under the guidance of the Midwest PBIS Center ([www.midwestpbis.org](http://www.midwestpbis.org)), we have worked diligently to establish a three-tiered response to student need. Tier 1 represents our universal practices, or what all students receive every day. This includes clear expectations, physical and

emotional safety, engaging instruction, and being treated with dignity and respect. Our goal is for Tier 1 to be sufficient for 80 percent of our students. Tier 2 is for students who need some additional support to find success. This includes small group interventions, such as group counseling, math and reading labs, and group mentoring and tutoring. We estimate approximately 15 percent of our students will need this level of support. Tier 3 is for 5 percent of our students who need the most support. Often, individualized plans are created for them. These plans

include our most intensive interventions, often utilizing resources from both the school and local community. With our finite resources, it is crucial we systematically approach intervention. In the tradition of PBIS, we combine data, systems, and practices to best meet the needs of each of our students.

Following the community schools philosophy has allowed us address the challenges of rural poverty in a proactive and thoughtful manner. By focusing on practices that are culturally relevant, trauma informed, and

restorative, and leveraging community partnerships along the way, we have created a multitiered system of support in each district that systematically assists our young people in meeting high expectations. Although there will always be work to be done, it is evident the work of the last five years has had a significantly positive impact on the children of Wayne County and we are excited to continue evolving and improving our support of their needs.

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