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Reimagining Schools as Community Infrastructure:

Integrating Community Schools and
Competency-Based Education for
Whole-Child Success

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JUNE 2026



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Suggested Citation

Organ, K. (2026). Reimagining Schools as Community Infrastructure: Integrating Community Schools and Competency-Based Education for Whole-Child Success. FullScale. <https://resources.fullscalelearning.org/artifacts/reimagining-schools-as-community-infrastructure-integrating-community-schools-and-competency-based-education-for-whole-child-success>



Thank you to the Siegel Family Endowment for supporting the creation of this report and the associated case studies.



About FullScale

We unite education leaders and organizations together to drive collective learning, action, and systems transformation. We break silos, bridge divides, lift up new evidence and unseen innovations, and accelerate change for lasting impact for every learner.



Introduction

The idea “it takes a village to raise a child” is a familiar one, and many communities have always maintained this deeply connected vision. However, in reality, many schools across America have traditionally functioned as islands, operating largely independently from their surrounding neighborhoods. This disconnect is costly, undermining students’ learning and sense of belonging at school, as well as the school’s effectiveness and connection to its community.^{24,25}

But this is changing. We know schools are not the only place where learning happens, and discussions about the importance of community-connected learning, real-world relevance, and learning ecosystems are becoming more common across the field.²⁶ Societal understandings of what a quality education looks like are shifting to demand student-centered, real-world-ready, whole-child learning. Many of these conversations revolve around questions like this one:

What if schools were reimaged as a core part of community infrastructure?

By moving from isolation to interconnection, schools can become hubs of learning and service, working in partnership with their neighbors to benefit not just young people, but the community as a whole.

SCHOOLS AS INSTITUTIONAL ISLANDS:	SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE:
Young people (students) are the “recipients” of the school’s educational services	Young people, families, and community members come to the school for many different reasons – to learn, receive job training, get childcare, seek medical services, and more
Trained staff and teachers are the “providers” of knowledge and services	Trained staff, teachers, community members, families, students, and partner organizations work in partnership to provide knowledge and services
Students come to school for a set number of hours per day to engage primarily with traditional academic subjects	Students have opportunities to learn meaningful content both at school and out in the community
The school campus is a closed resource, used exclusively for student- or staff-focused purposes and programs	School assets (buildings, playgrounds, sports facilities, wifi access, etc.) are seen as community resources and available to the public
Schools have limited interaction with local leaders, businesses, or services	School staff, families, and community members are all involved in the design and implementation of the school
Families rarely contribute to the design and implementation of the school, beyond school-provided opportunities for input	

At FullScale, we believe that learning that helps young people realize their full potential is competency-based, personalized, and focused on the whole child. Reimagining school as community infrastructure helps make those three tenets possible in a way that rarely is true in a traditional model—and **that's why we believe it's so powerful.**



What is this project about?

This project showcases four diverse schools that are reimagining traditional education by blending two powerful models: **community schools** and **competency-based education**. While their day-to-day realities vary, each school successfully integrates pieces from both approaches in order to provide competency-based, personalized, and whole-child learning in partnership with their local communities.

To guide us, we draw on two frameworks that have supported school transformation across the country: the [community schools framework](#) from Community Schools Forward and the [competency-based education definition](#) from the Aurora Institute (now FullScale).

When used in tandem, these two approaches can powerfully support a community-connected, student-centered approach to learning.

In this report, we will first explore the two frameworks and map the ways they intersect and reinforce one another. Then, we will use our four featured schools to illustrate various features of these frameworks in practice, demonstrating how the integration of these two approaches has helped to transform their schools from institutional islands to shared community infrastructure in the service of kids.



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Guiding Frameworks

Community Schools

Developed in 2023 by the Community Schools Forward coalition following conversations with over 700 practitioners nationwide, the [community schools framework](#) integrates research from the science of learning and development to articulate a vision for how to “transform a school into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development.”^{2,3,4}

This framework includes the six school-level practices articulated on page 7, as well as enabling conditions and supportive infrastructure to sustain the work (see image on right).

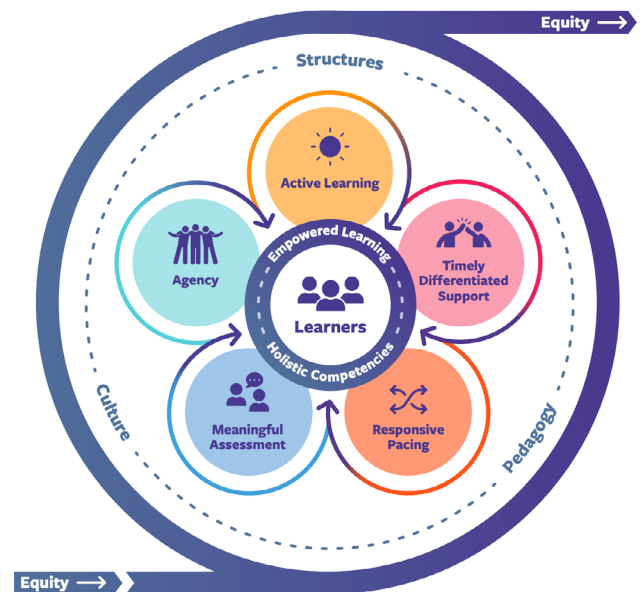


Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

Competency-Based Education

Like the community schools framework, the 2019 competency-based education (CBE) definition was developed collaboratively by a group of national practitioners led by the Aurora Institute (now FullScale). Grounded in the science of learning and development, this framework places learners at the center of a personalized, mastery-driven approach to student learning that represents a “major shift in school culture, structures, and pedagogy focused on ensuring that all students succeed.”¹

The CBE framework includes the seven key elements articulated on page 8, as well as supportive structures and commitments that make those practices transformational (see image on right).¹⁰



Key Practices of Community Schools

POWERFUL STUDENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	Families and students actively participate in the school community and are key partners in decision-making, shaping the school's environment, priorities, and partnerships. Families' lived wisdom and experience inform approaches to student success.
COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP, SHARED POWER AND VOICE	Families, students, teachers, principals, and community partners co-create a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility as they make decisions together.
EXPANDED, ENRICHED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	Before- and after-school, weekend, and summer programs provide expanded time, expanded staffing, and expanded opportunities for learning and engagement... Students have opportunities to explore their passions, dive deeper into the application of academic content, and strengthen their knowledge and skills.
RIGOROUS, COMMUNITY-CONNECTED INSTRUCTION	Teaching and learning in the school infuses high-level content and skills with real-world learning opportunities. The curriculum is deeply connected to the local community and students' identities, cultures, and experiences, providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful inquiry-based learning and problem-solving.
CULTURE OF BELONGING, SAFETY, AND CARE	The school climate is welcoming and fosters trust among students, families, partners, and staff. Each person in the school community is valued for their rich diversity of experiences and is encouraged to share their views, knowledge, and culture... Students feel connected to and are active participants in the school community.
INTEGRATED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT	To promote healthy learning and development, a dedicated team composed primarily of school staff and community partners intentionally and systematically coordinates services, supports, and opportunities that foster individual and collective well-being, using an assets-based approach to nurture the strengths and address the needs of students and families.

Key Elements of Competency-Based Education

ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES	Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.
STUDENT AGENCY	Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT	Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence. Students engage in authentic, performance-based assessment, such as project-based, community-based, and workplace-based learning that is aligned with required competencies and higher-order skills.
TIMELY DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORT	Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
RESPONSIVE PACING	Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time. The primary goal is deeper learning, not faster learning. Varied pacing can mean that students who are proficient in certain standards or competencies are encouraged to engage in ways that lead to greater depth of knowledge and multiple ways of demonstrating competency.
PERSONALIZED PATHWAYS	Students learn actively using different pathways. Student learning pathways are personalized, reflecting each student's unique needs, strengths, interests, goals, and pace. The order in which students master learning targets may vary. Personalized learning experiences may include formal and informal learning opportunities both within and outside schools.
EQUITABLE CULTURE, STRUCTURE, AND PEDAGOGY	Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems. In the words of the National Equity Project, this means ensuring that "each child receives what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential."

How These Approaches Support Students and Communities

There is a substantial body of evidence supporting both community schools and a competency-based approach to learning, although much more research needs to be done to continue identifying the core components and associated impact of each approach. A few key takeaways from studies and meta-analyses about each approach include the following:

Community Schools

- ★ Increased student academic achievement^{5,6,7,8,9}
- ★ Increased teacher satisfaction^{5,9}
- ★ More positive student attitudes about school⁷
- ★ Increased student attendance⁸
- ★ Decreased grade retention and student dropout rates⁸
- ★ Increased family engagement in school and parental sense of responsibility for their children's learning^{5,9}
- ★ Improved school culture⁵
- ★ Increased student motivation and academic confidence^{7,9}
- ★ Increased community support and pride in the school^{5,9}
- ★ Increased neighborhood safety⁵

Competency-Based Education

- ★ Increased student engagement in learning^{12,15,20}
- ★ Increased student learning at an appropriate level of challenge (zone of proximal development)^{11,20}
- ★ Improved teacher-student relationships¹¹
- ★ Improved student attendance^{14,16}
- ★ Increased student growth on academic assessments¹⁷
- ★ Increased student learning capacities (student academic mindsets such as intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, self-regulated learning skills, and academic behavior)^{13,19,20}
- ★ Improved student academic performance^{21,22,23}

“Being a community-centered school really gives us the ability to know all of our students, to know the whole child. And then with the community support that we have, it lets us meet their social, emotional, physical, and academic needs.”

Derek DiStefano
Principal, Morgan Elementary School



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What the Frameworks Have in Common

Community schools and competency-based education are **deeply complementary**, sharing a foundational commitment to centering learners' needs, experiences, and whole selves. In fact, when we mapped the two frameworks presented above against each other, we found overlap between all six of the community schools elements and four of the seven CBE elements, as shown in the table below:

Competency-Based Education

Expanded learning environments	Learning is not confined to classroom-based instruction; instead, learning is contextualized and applied in authentic settings that are meaningful to students.	Rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction	Expanded & enriched learning opportunities	Personalized pathways
Learner authenticity and wholeness	School celebrates and affirms learners' identities, backgrounds, and context; learning is connected to who learners are and their life experiences.	Powerful student & family engagement	Culture of belonging, safety, & care	Equitable culture, structure, & pedagogy
Personalized learning experiences	Learning experiences—both in and out of the classroom— incorporate learners' interests and experiences to support engagement and ownership. Learners identify personal learning goals connected to their interests, aspirations, or growth areas.	Expanded & enriched learning opportunities	Student agency	Personalized pathways

Community Schools

Decentralization of power	Families and communities are meaningfully involved as co-creators of the learning ecosystem, in ways that are reciprocal and mutual.		Collaborative leadership, shared power, & voice	Student agency	
Foundational commitment to meeting needs	Coordinated supports address physical, emotional, and material needs that affect learning. The learning environment norms and routines foster safety, inclusion, participation, and trusting relationships.	Culture of belonging, safety, & care	Integrated systems of support	Timely differentiated support	Equitable culture, structure, & pedagogy

This high degree of alignment is noteworthy. It means that integrating both frameworks is not “one more thing,” but rather, that schools already grounded in one model are likely well on their way to implementing the other. By intentionally combining both frameworks, schools can improve their ability to serve their students and communities, as exemplified by the schools in this study.



Frameworks in Action: Insights from the Field

Featured Schools

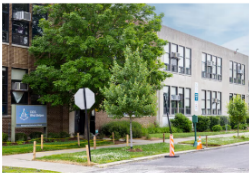
Over the course of the project, we visited four unique schools from across the United States. Each of these schools is a beautiful example of a learning community that sees itself as part of community infrastructure, rather than a standalone educational institution. All four schools integrate elements of both the community schools and competency-based frameworks, though each has its own unique approach to how they do that in practice.

The schools featured in this project represent a wide range of student and community characteristics, as shown in the table on the next page. We intentionally selected schools from diverse and varied communities—urban, rural, and suburban; regionally dispersed; elementary to high school—to illustrate different ways these educational frameworks show up in practice across a wide variety of settings.

Explore our case studies for each school by clicking on the map below:



School Characteristics

				
SCHOOL	MORGAN	RAÍCES DEL SABER	WEST BELDEN	WINOOSKI
SETTING	 Rural	 Suburban	 Urban	 Suburban
GEOGRAPHY	South (North Carolina)	West (New Mexico)	Midwest (Illinois)	Northeast (Vermont)
TYPE	Public	Charter	Charter	Public
GRADES	PK-5	K-5	K-8	6-12
FREE/ REDUCED LUNCH	 97%	 44%	 87%	 82%
STUDENT RACE				
American Indian Asian Black Hispanic/Latinx White Multiple races				

How the Featured Schools Embody the Frameworks

On the following pages, we identify compelling examples of how the featured schools put the principles of each guiding framework into practice. After each example, we also articulate (in italics) some of the ways each example helps to transform their school from a traditional institutional island to a core part of community infrastructure.

Community Schools

Principle	Example
Powerful student and family engagement	The Community Schools Coordinator at CICS West Belden hangs out outside during dropoff and pickup every day to talk to families, share information about resources and upcoming events, and build relationships with neighbors and parents. <i>This practice opens up the campus and its resources to families and community members, and helps identify potential new collaborative partnerships, emerging needs, and community resources.</i>
Collaborative leadership, shared power and voice	Raíces del Saber has both a Parent Council and a Student Council. Both groups meet regularly with school leaders to set priorities for the school, help make decisions, apply for grants, and plan community programs and other school initiatives. <i>This practice ensures that families and community members are meaningfully involved in the school's design and implementation.</i>
Expanded, enriched learning opportunities	At Winooski Middle-High School, the Flexible Pathways and Work-Based Learning Coordinator connects students to partners in the community for internships, hands-on projects, work-based learning placements, and other career exploration opportunities. <i>This practice gets students learning outside of the school building and school hours, so they can have meaningful learning experiences in the community.</i>
Rigorous, community-connected instruction	Community knowledge-keepers share their expertise with students at Raíces del Saber, connecting cultural traditions and academic learning through memorable hands-on experiences like learning traditional cooking techniques for produce from the school garden. <i>This practice expands who is seen as a “provider of knowledge” beyond school staff, and honors community knowledge and expertise.</i>

Table continued on page 14.

Culture of belonging, safety, and care	Every week, Winooski Middle-High School students organize and lead a community meeting for everyone in the school, which includes celebrations of student accomplishments. The school also has many student-led affinity groups and clubs, as well as a team of adult cultural liaisons to connect and support students and their families. <i>This practice helps students feel safe, known, and empowered at school. They are not merely passive recipients, but active co-creators of their learning community.</i>
Integrated systems of support	At Morgan Elementary, collaboration between the MTSS coordinator, school counselor, community partners, and other staff ensures that all students have their physical, emotional, and academic needs met. The local community shows up to sponsor an annual back-to-school shopping trip, volunteer daily in classrooms, and so much more. <i>This practice creates an active and mutual partnership between school and community.</i>

Competency-Based Education

Principle	Example
Essential competencies	At Morgan Elementary, students have personalized “Bronco Binders” that contain student-friendly versions of the school’s proficiency scales. Students can track their own progress as they work towards mastery of each of the proficiency scales, which span both academic content and interpersonal skills. <i>This practice helps students actively own their learning, not just passively receive it.</i>
Student agency	Winooski Middle-High School offers a course called iLab, in which students can choose a topic of personal interest and design their own course in collaboration with a community member who has expertise in that area. <i>This practice ensures that students interact with local community members as part of their learning journey. It also broadens the definition of who is a provider of valuable knowledge and services beyond just school staff.</i>
Meaningful assessment	Students at Raíces del Saber do many hands-on projects and performance assessments through their years at the school, culminating in a fifth grade capstone project called caracol that invites them to showcase their learning journey through the elementary years with a project of their choosing. These capstones are presented at the local college to community members and families in a culminating end-of-year event. <i>This practice allows students to become active drivers of their own learning, not merely passive recipients.</i>

Table continued on page 15.

Timely differentiated support	In the middle school grades, CICS West Belden has rearranged their schedule to create block scheduling, which allows teachers more time to provide small-group or one-on-one support during regular class periods. The school also uses various online learning platforms to help supplement instruction for both students who need additional scaffolding and students who are ready for an additional challenge. <i>This practice allows students to become active drivers of their own learning, not merely passive recipients. It also allows students to move through content at a pace that is appropriate for them, rather than expecting all students to move through content in a set number of hours.</i>
Responsive pacing	Although students are grouped into classrooms by age at Morgan Elementary, they may not be working on the same content as their peers. Instead, students are working through the school's proficiency scales at their own pace, in collaboration with both peers and teachers. When students reach mastery, they ring a bell and the entire classroom celebrates. <i>This practice allows students to become active drivers of their own learning, not merely passive recipients. It also allows students to move through content at a pace that is appropriate for them, rather than expecting all students to move through content in a set number of hours.</i>
Personalized pathways	Winooski Middle-High School students complete capstone projects each year, which allow them to develop both academic proficiencies and durable skills through exploration of topics they are passionate about. Students also can decide how to demonstrate the school's graduate proficiencies through work of their choice, whether from a class or another learning experience. <i>This practice allows students to become active drivers of their own learning, not merely passive recipients. It also contextualizes learning to students' interests, goals, and the realities of their lives.</i>
Equitable culture, structures, & pedagogy	One of the structures that CICS West Belden has built to support student learning is their "soft start" program, which lets students arrive early at school to eat breakfast, spend time informally with other students and staff, and ease into the day. This program benefits students, but also helps support parents who work early morning shifts and need before-school childcare. <i>This practice ensures that students are ready to learn, regardless of their circumstances.</i>

Want More Examples?

Read the full case studies and more [here](#).

Key Takeaways

While each featured school is unique, clear patterns emerged across all four sites. These themes offer important insights for leaders looking to integrate these frameworks into their own schools.

This approach to education requires an intentional focus on relationships.

At each school, we asked about the conditions and practices that make their approach possible. And at each school we heard some version of the same response: talking to people. While this might seem simple, it requires intentionality and consistency. Staff from all four schools mentioned many ways they enact this: being present to chat at pickup and dropoff; attending community events and sports matches on the weekends; building time into the daily schedule for students to connect informally and personally with both peers and staff; collecting regular family and community surveys and hosting community forums; and simply building rapport and trust through consistency and human presence.

“Our families put a lot of trust in the school, and vice versa. We’re the experts in the education; they’re the experts in their kids. That connection is the biggest thing. Yes, we’re finding resources for our families. Yes, we’re bringing people into the school. But if we don’t know who our families are or what the community needs, or don’t have strong connections, we don’t know what to do.”

—Kathy McInerney, Assistant Principal, CICS West Belden

Schools saw many benefits to this approach.

Though none of the schools described this work as easy, all agreed that this approach to education is worth it. Schools mentioned benefits such as increased attendance, improved staff morale and retention, reduced behavioral issues, improved academic performance, and a better ability to serve learners with special needs. Externally, this approach led to more support and meaningful connections with the community, ranging from increased volunteerism, increased parental engagement in their children’s learning, and new opportunities for student off-campus learning like field trips, internships, and work-study programs.

“I think that it’s hard to convince a community to keep on investing in education when there is a disconnect. And so I think competency-based learning and a community-based school is really expressing a value. It’s expressing appreciation for reciprocity that happens between learning in a building, learning in classes, and learning in our community. We are positioning our students to reflect deeply about themselves, juxtaposed with genuine, authentic experiences of our community. And it builds some amazing connections with the community that wouldn’t otherwise exist.” —Jean Berthiaume, Co-Principal, Winooski Middle-High School



Variability in implementation is normal.

None of the featured sites embodied every element of both frameworks perfectly, and all readily identified areas where they want to continue deepening their practice. We illustrate this variability in the depth and consistency of practices across the frameworks in the heatmap on [page 18](#).

Current variability across the practices does not imply that schools are static, however. Each school we visited spoke about how they started by building on something that their school was already doing well, and expanded their work and impact from there.

“My passion for competency-based education came from my time as a classroom teacher. Grading systems were antiquated, and we needed to update what we were doing. Especially at the elementary level, it’s far more important to me that students master concepts, rather than when they master them.... so we started with that and built from there.” —Derek DiStefano, Principal, Morgan Elementary School

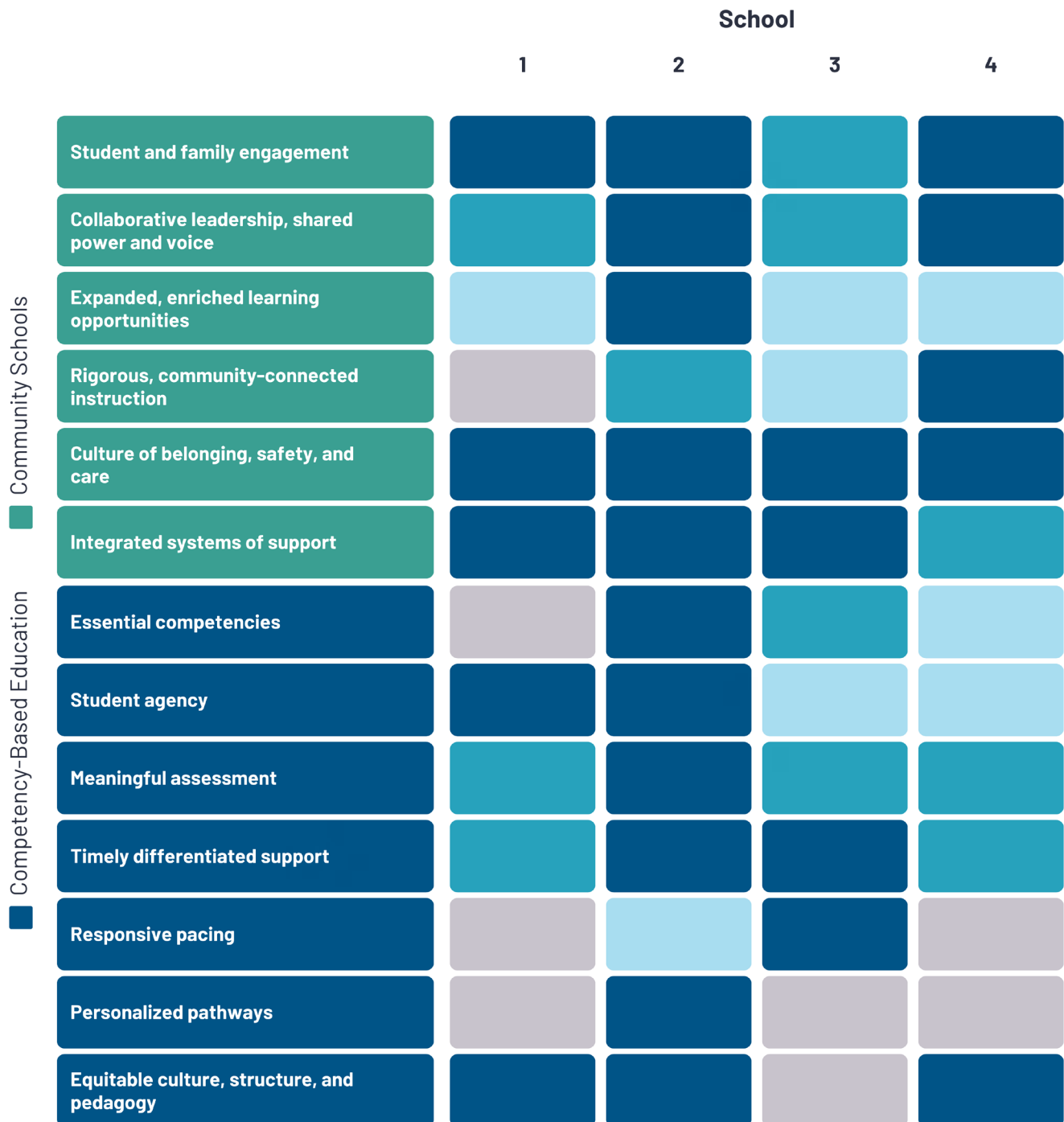
A culture of care is foundational.

When we asked each school what was at the heart of their work, we consistently heard the same thing: building a strong foundation of care and trust among staff, students, and families. And when we mapped the practices observed at each school to the various elements of the two guiding frameworks, we saw the same thing—mountains of strong evidence at each of the four schools for ways in which they have created a culture of belonging, safety, and care. As shown in the heatmap, there was variability school-by-school everywhere else, but not in this area.

“I believe education is done out of love. Because fundamentally, education starts in the family; we educate our children out of love and a desire to see them succeed. We often avoid talking about that in education.... but I try to find ways to express my love. Let’s ensure that our students feel it from us, because when they feel it, they will respond.” —Dr. Hector Girón, Head Administrator, Raíces del Saber

Frameworks Heatmap

Minimal evidence Early stages Present Strong





Conclusion

Transformation does not require schools to choose a single framework; it requires us to build bridges between them. **Community schools and competency-based education are mutually reinforcing frameworks.** When integrated, they strengthen each other. Community schools possess an incredible track record of providing holistic student support and care, yet they frequently face the challenge of making daily academic content deeply engaging. Competency-based schools are built on a rigorous pedagogical approach that emphasizes the relevance and personalization of learning experiences for every student, yet without the intentional connections to systems of support and opportunity that extend beyond the building, they may fail to live up to that vision.

The four examples featured in this project demonstrate the power that comes from integrating both frameworks. These schools show us that schools do not need to choose *between* academic rigor and community engagement; the two are mutually reinforcing. Schools do not need to choose *between* care for their students and having high expectations for their learning; they are inextricably connected.

Next Steps

Do you want to move your school towards being more community-connected, supportive, and personalized for every learner? Below are a few resources from trusted partners who provide excellent guidance and/or technical support in helping schools transform into learning ecosystems.

COMMUNITY SCHOOL RESOURCES	COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING RESOURCES
* Resources and guidance available from the Coalition for Community Schools here. * Resources and guidance from the Center for Universal Education here. * Technical assistance and training available from organizations such as the Center for Supportive Schools, the Coalition for Community Schools, the Partnership for Student Success, the National Center for Community Schools, and more.	* Resources and guidance available from FullScale through the CBE Starter Pack here. * Resources and guidance available from the Learner-Centered Collaborative here. * Technical assistance and training available from organizations such as Building 21, Great Schools Partnership, CBL Partners, KnowledgeWorks, and more.

Use these frameworks and resources to amplify what your community already does well and build from there.



Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to this project over the years, including the following members of both the current FullScale and former Aurora Institute teams:

- * Ashley Fellows
- * Chiara Wegener
- * Gugma Vidal
- * Jazmin Williams
- * Jennifer Kabaker
- * Jillian Joe
- * Kathleen Poliski
- * Laurie Gagnon
- * Megan Benay
- * Virgel Hammonds

We also want to extend our gratitude to the videographers who so beautifully told the stories of the four featured schools in this study:

- * Joel Gonzalez from weourstory: [CICS West Belden](#), [Morgan Elementary](#), [Raíces del Saber](#)
- * Endeavor Films: [Winooski Middle-High School](#)

And most importantly, we want to thank the learning communities who graciously welcomed us and allowed us to learn from them!

CICS WEST BELDEN	WINOOSKI MIDDLE-HIGH	MORGAN ELEMENTARY	RAÍCES DEL SABER
* Angela Serrano * Brian Finnerty * Jesus Meraz * Kathy McInerney * Kristin Eng * Molly Quinn * Sara Miranda Students: * Athena * Galilea * Idrhiana * Kai * Marvin * Naomi * Noah	* Annie Schenieder * Caitlin MacLeod-Bluver * Courtney Poquette * Jean Berthiaume * Kate Grodin * Lindsey Cox * Michael Eppolito * Mohamed Diop * Rebecca Savage * Will Andrews Students: * Alexis * Ankit * Leo * Noblette * Winner	* Derek DiStefano * Donna Groce * Julia Rohlfing * Krystina Wagoner * Rachel Jackson * Rene Jones * Sara Frick Students: * Abdiel * Connor * Emma * Isabella * Jayla * Jon Luke * Joseph * Nicole * Thomas	* Alessa Ibañez * Carlos Aceves * Hector Girón * Lucía Veronica Carmona * Roberto Moctezuma Family members: * Nancy * Sarah Students: * Emma * Milo * Paola * Sofia

This report was created by the FullScale team with the support of AI tools for editing and design. We verify all outputs and protect confidential information. Read more about our approach [here](#).



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