

Marin Voice: Community schools offer strategy toward educational equity

By *TENISHA TATE-AUSTIN* / April 16, 2023

Community schools are a partnership of educators, local community leaders and parents working together for optimal student opportunity and achievement by engaging the child, supporting the family and improving education, as well as life outcomes.

Community schools have been in existence for decades. Those who are familiar with the concept often associate them with mobile health vans and dental clinics that come to campus, food bank distributions on site and other essential services that aim to meet the “whole child” needs of every student on campus.

In Marin County, the five school districts with more than 80% of Marin’s students of color and economically disadvantaged students could all be awarded California Community Schools Partnership Program grants by the state. These grants, likely totaling well over \$10 million over the next five years, represent an unprecedented opportunity to help Marin’s education system become more equitable.

The Sausalito Marin City School District leads the county, having already been awarded an implementation grant for the 2022-23 school year.

These grants represent a new generation of community schools’ work.

After decades of research, educators have found that it isn’t just providing extra services on campus that improves student outcomes. Community schools are effective when they include intentional processes that bring youth and families to the same table with teachers, administrators and community agencies to understand the systemic barriers students and families are facing in our community, and to collaboratively develop solutions.

Fundamentally, community schools are about keeping students at the center and changing how we make decisions about where our collective resources are allocated within our community. Community schools aim to actualize community ownership of decision-making.

Marin’s Community School (at the Marin County Office of Education), Novato Unified School District, San Rafael City Schools, Sausalito Marin City School District and Shoreline Unified School District are all at varying stages of planning and implementing the community schools process.

These districts have implemented programs and initiatives for years aimed to meet the “whole child” needs evident within their campus communities.

Additionally, the process of community schools will gather feedback and provide insight into the experiences of students and families who are least supported by the systems of care here in Marin. In partnership with the community, some districts have already identified new strategies to implement if awarded the grant.

If you would like to learn more, you are invited to attend a free forum about community schools, hosted by the Marin Communications Forum, on April 28 at the Embassy Suites Hotel in San Rafael. This event is sponsored by First 5 Marin, the Marin Community Foundation, Marin Promise Partnership and San Rafael City Schools. For more information or to register, email Michelle@First5Marin.org.

This is an important opportunity for all members of our community to learn about and engage in the process of collaboratively envisioning what a more equitable education system would look like in our county. In addition to educators, this event is appropriate for local nonprofits, community-based organizations and parents.

Together, we can build a common understanding of where our collective strengths lie. As a community, we can wield these strengths to ensure systemic barriers are lowered or eliminated so every student can access the opportunity of education in our schools.

We all have a stake in ensuring that every child thrives in school, and that each child in every part of our county has the opportunity to learn and achieve to the best of their ability. That is a commitment we must make. That’s what community is all about.

Tenisha Tate-Austin is the director of collaborative action for Marin Promise Partnership, a collective impact organization based in San Rafael committed to closing educational opportunity gaps.