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## **More Schools Open Their Doors to the Whole Community**

### **States and Towns Deliver an Array of Government Services on Campus**

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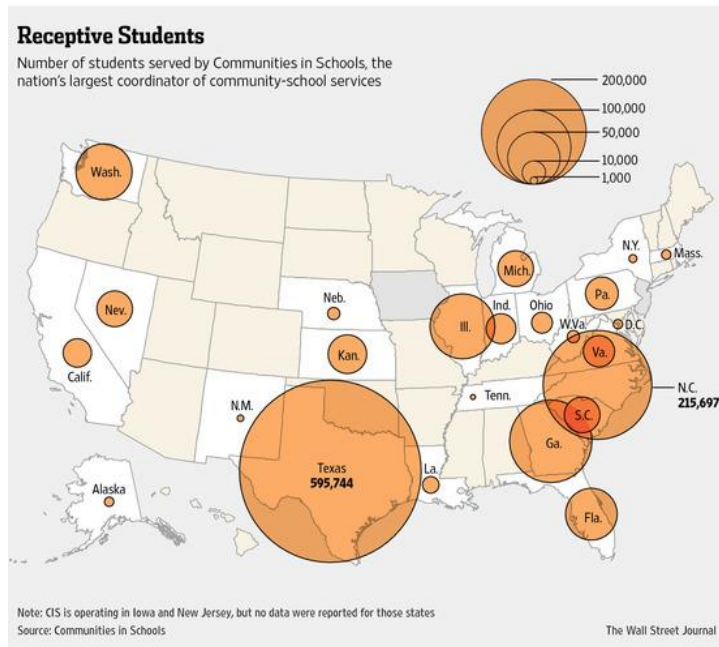
On a recent weekday here, a steady stream of people dropped by one central location for food stamps, family counseling and job ideas—their local school.

While instruction has ended for the summer, these classrooms remain open as part of a wider trend around the country of "community schools," where public and private groups bring services closer to students and residents year round and, in some cases, help boost student performance.

With backing at local, state and federal levels, the decades-old idea for improving schools and neighborhoods is gaining ground despite some funding uncertainties and doubts about community schools' success.

The largest coordinator of such programs, Communities in Schools, saw a 6% increase in its reach in the 2012-13 school year, covering schools with a total of more than 1.3 million students in 26 states.

Dan Cardinali, president of the nonprofit group, which focuses on students, said its goal was to maintain the quality of its services at the same time that it reaches a bigger and bigger audience.



Skeptics of the programs contend the case isn't strong enough yet to justify a significant increase in resources. "A lot more pilots and research are needed before we should replicate this on a massive scale," said Jason Bedrick, an education-policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Still, the idea is gaining momentum. Last Wednesday, a bipartisan federal bill that authorizes more money for community schools was introduced on the House floor.

Last month, New York City Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#), a Democrat, announced a grant of \$52 million to set up 40 community schools in the city, dubbing it "one of the cornerstones of our education agenda." Last year, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican, expanded a program that places state Department of Human Services workers inside schools to 169 sites now from 124 at the start of the 2012-13 school year.

Here in Kent County, a southwest region of Michigan that includes Grand Rapids, the number of community schools has grown to 28 this year from eight in 2006.

"We began to ask ourselves, 'Do we ask our clients to come into large, county buildings or take the services to where our clients are?'" said Carol Paine-McGovern, executive director of the Kent School Services Network, which partners with other agencies to distribute aid inside schools and provide community-school coordinators, who act as liaisons between service providers and the schools.

Teachers and administrators in high-poverty areas say the extra help frees up time for them to focus on academics. "Before I had Sarah [the community-school coordinator], when kids or families needed food, I'm the one online trying to find solutions," said Mary Lang, principal at North Godwin Elementary School, where 92% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. "It took time away from my real job."

Ms. Lang, who allots \$35,000 of her \$3.2 million annual budget to pay for part of the coordinator's salary, said student attendance and scores have improved since her school started the program. Between 2011 and 2013, fourth-grade math scores jumped to 87% proficiency from 69% proficiency, and reading moved to 92% from 85%. Third-grade reading was the one area that lacked improvement, falling three percentage points to 65% in 2013.

Child Trends, a nonpartisan research center, found earlier this year that integrated student supports, such as community schools, helped children stay in school and improved math scores, though it didn't find a clear impact on reading or English-language learning.

In Cincinnati, which is often hailed as a model with a majority of schools in a community-school form, less than half of all students in the school district tested proficient in state exams, according to the district's 2012-13 report card, though there have been consistent improvements in reading and math scores for students who received additional tutoring.

A key, some researchers say, is that the extra supports be combined with changes inside the classroom. "Yes, absolutely, let's make sure that we provide strong social supports for disadvantaged children, but let's not use that as an excuse to ignore what's happening or what's not happening inside of the school," said Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning education policy think tank.

The idea has taken off with some Republicans who favor the emphasis on local governance. Rep. Aaron Schock (R., Ill.) teamed up with House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D., Md.) on the Full-Service Community Schools Act of 2014, the bill just introduced in the House.

"Rather than force a school to reinvent the wheel, there are many community-based agencies in the area who can provide these sources of support more efficiently and effectively," said Mr. Schock, who believes the bill has a good chance of passing.

On a recent afternoon, 43-year-old Maria Gonzalez watched as a dental professional examined her 12-year-old son's teeth at a clinic in a Grand Rapids elementary and middle school. "This is a relief," she said. "It's safer and more secure this way."