

Saint Elizabeth University Launches the New Jersey Institute for Community Schools



[From left to right.] Back row: Dr. Gregory Stankiewicz, Bryan Murdock, Dr. Ross Whiting, Rosie Grant. Front row: Dr. Annesha Walker, Liz Hansen, Julie Borst, Dr. Patricia Heindel, Dr. Christine Miles.

On March 13, 2025, educators, community leaders, and policy advocates gathered at Saint Elizabeth University to celebrate the launch of the [New Jersey Institute for Community Schools \(NJICS\)](#). Housed within the university's [Center for Human and Social Development](#), the Institute will serve as a statewide hub to support, strengthen, and expand the community school model across New Jersey. The Institute's message:

Community schools are one of the most evidence-based and cost-effective ways to ensure that every New Jersey child and family has access to the supports and services that allow them to thrive.

The launch featured a dynamic lineup of leaders in the field, including Kwesi Rollins from the National Institute for Educational Leadership and its Coalition for Community Schools initiative. Bianca M. del Rio from the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center spoke about the University-Assisted Community Schools model, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, equity, and sustained investment. Attendees also heard from New Jersey superintendents, partners, and agency leaders from Paterson, Jersey City, Trenton, Red Bank, Wildwood, and Newton, who shared on-the-ground examples of how the community school model is transforming education and student well-being in their districts.

In This Issue

Launch of NJICS

The who, what, where, and why of the Institute's launch.

Institute Insights

Updates, new initiatives, internal milestones, and upcoming events from NJICS.

National Moves

News about community schools across the country.

NJ Happenings

Updates on policy, funding, legislation, and budgets that impact NJ education.

Mapping Momentum

Tracking the growth of community schools around the nation and across the state.

Upcoming...

Groundbreakers

Spotlights on NJ Community Schools, showcasing expansions, implementations, partnerships, and student outcomes.

Resources

[Introduction to Community Schools](#)

A Long-Term Vision Comes to Life

NJICS is the culmination of years of collaboration among education-focused organizations, all working together toward a common purpose: *fostering the growth and sustainability of community schools across the state*. It's more than a new initiative; it's a statewide commitment to reimagining what school can be when students, families, educators, and communities work together.

Aiming to provide long-term infrastructure and statewide coordination for this proven approach to school improvement, the Institute will offer training, technical assistance, and a shared learning space for school districts, nonprofit partners, and higher education institutions. With a strong foundation rooted in Saint Elizabeth University's leadership on social-emotional learning and school climate, NJICS is poised to help make community schools the norm—not the exception—across New Jersey.

3 Core Resources to Expand Community Connections

Community schools are built on the idea that schools function best when they are deeply connected to the communities they serve. NJICS exists to help districts strengthen those connections—by offering direct support, building professional networks, and aligning local efforts with statewide strategy and resources.

The Institute's work is organized around 3 core resources:

Technical Assistance Center

Modeled after successful initiatives in states like California, this center will offer targeted guidance to help schools launch, expand, and sustain high-quality community school strategies.

Community of Practice

NJICS will bring together educators, school leaders, coordinators, and partners to share insights, solve problems, and learn from one another in a sustained and supportive network.

Research and Learning Hub

Drawing on the expertise of NJ's higher education institutions, NJICS will document and share what's working—providing data, stories, and analysis to inform both practice and policy.

The Heart of Education Begins Here

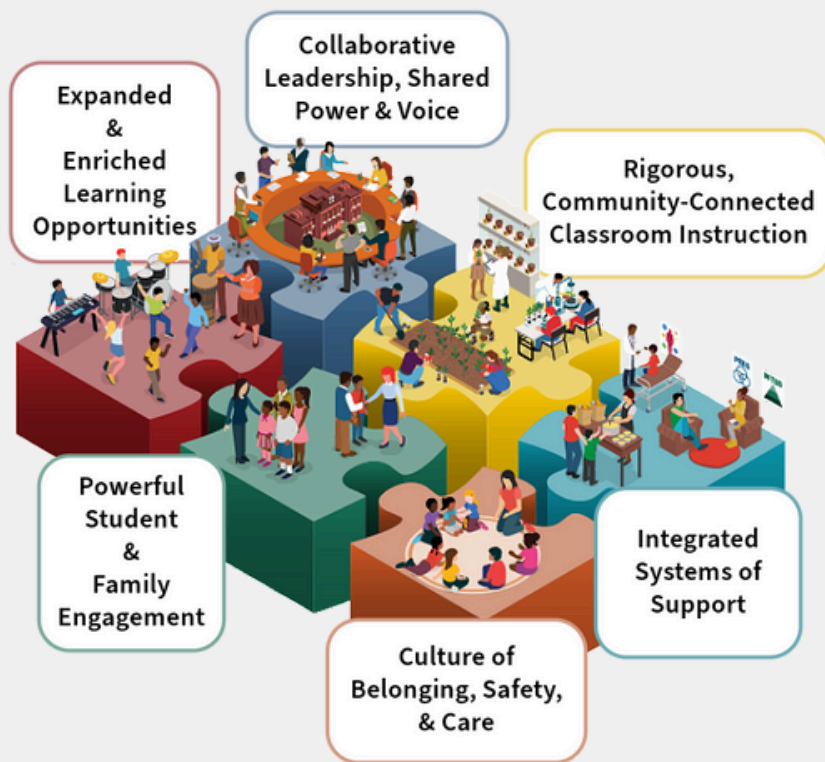
Community schools are more than a model—they're a mindset. One that puts students at the center and surrounds them with a full circle of care, opportunity, and belonging. That mindset **only works when schools are deeply connected to the communities they serve**. **NJICS exists to help districts strengthen those connections** by offering direct support, building professional networks, and aligning local efforts with statewide strategy and resources.

To ensure that students achieve and communities thrive.

“Community Schools Forward” Sets the Stage

In 2022, national leaders in education research came together to launch Community Schools Forward (CSF)—a collaborative effort to support and expand the community school movement. Engaging with more than 700 practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and community partners, CSF developed the [Essentials for Community Schools Transformation](#) framework. The Essentials framework (often called the CSF Framework) codified six key interconnected practices to help policymakers and practitioners align around a research- and practice-based conception of community schools that puts students, families, and communities at the center.

Key Practices for Community Schools Transformation



The CSF Framework is backed by research and three trusted partners:



Federal Mental Health Funding Cuts

On May 1, [Gov. Phil Murphy responded](#) to the U.S. Department of Education's **cancellation of nearly \$1 billion in school-based mental health grants**. New Jersey was in year three of a \$15 million, five-year initiative to expand access to school-based mental health professionals—now set to end prematurely, despite continued need.

State Budget & Community Schools Funding

In April, the [New Jersey Community Schools Coalition](#) formally requested that the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee approve a \$3 million line item in the FY2026 state budget that would support the NJ Department of Education in launching a grant program for community school expansion. [The request](#) is still under discussion as budget hearings continue.

NJ Legislative Initiatives Impacting Education

- | | <u>Status</u> |
|--|---|
| • Expanding Early Child Education (S-3910)
Proposes guaranteed free, full-day kindergarten statewide and a structured expansion of universal preschool access. | Amended and passed by Senate Education Committee; advancing toward full vote. |
| • Chronic Absenteeism Task Force (S-3776)
Seeks to establish a state-level task force to investigate and address the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism . | Passed by Senate Education Committee; advancing toward full vote. |
| • Cost-Benefit Analysis for PILOTs (S-4069)
Would require applicants for long-term tax exemptions to submit financial impact assessments, including effects on public schools . | Amended and passed by Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee; advancing toward full vote. |
| • Higher Education Funding Concerns
The proposed FY2026 budget includes significant cuts to higher ed operating aid and student financial aid —changes that would likely hit low-income students the hardest . | Included in proposed budget; final decision pending. |

Mapping Momentum

Around the Nation



Through the *California Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP)*, **California** has invested over \$4.1B in planning, implementing, and expanding community schools. So far, \$3.4B has been allocated, supporting over 2,500 schools across the state.



Maryland currently supports 621 community schools through grants funded by the *Blueprint for Maryland's Future*. Despite proposed budget cuts, lawmakers recently voted to continue expanding the program statewide.

Chicago Public Schools adopted the *Sustainable Community Schools* model in 2016 with \$10M in startup funds. Schools partner with local organizations and leadership teams, and ongoing support comes via Title I and Supplemental Aid allocations.



Launched over a decade ago in 2014, **New York City's Community Schools Initiative** now includes 421 schools across all districts. Research shows improvements in attendance, grades, and graduation rates, especially in high-need schools.



Across New Jersey

Districts with federal Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) grants:

3

First convening of the NJ Community Schools Coalition:

2016

Join the Community Schools Movement!

Whether you're an educator, policymaker, community partner, or advocate, there's a role for you in strengthening New Jersey's community schools.

To learn more, [join our mailing list](#), or reach out at info@njinstituteformcommunityschools.com.

