# Schools as Community Infrastructure

Executive Summary

What opportunities exist for positive change—for our children, families, educators, and communities—when we reimagine schools as vital public infrastructure? We at Siegel Family Endowment believe that exploring this question is critical if we are to begin to address the vast inequities and challenges facing public education.

Fortunately, many practitioners all over the country are already placing school at the heart of community and community at the heart of school. This paper amplifies this work in the hope of spurring conversation, community engagement, and action.

At Siegel Family Endowment, we take a multidimensional approach that views school as the sum of three interconnected parts:

- Physical infrastructure that includes the built environment that enables teaching and learning to happen
- Digital infrastructure that includes all aspects of technology, data, and systems that are used by various actors within the school ecosystem
- Social infrastructure that includes the relationships and connections between the vast array of people who are directly and indirectly part of the school community

Physical — Digital — Social
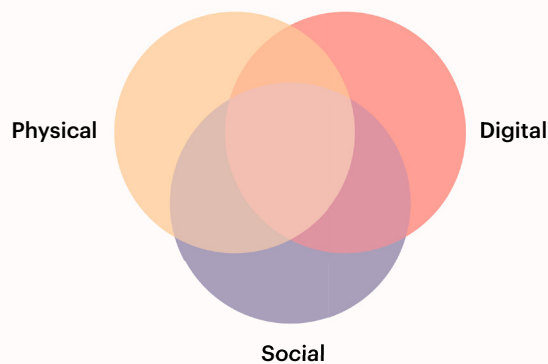
While it may at first seem unusual to frame these efforts with the language of infrastructure, viewing the work through the lens of a holistic framework presents a broader opportunity to explore the transformative power of innovations in education, and to imagine ways of pushing them even further to empower and improve entire communities.

We present three case studies that illustrate how communities are putting these ideas into practice, and the lessons that we can take from their experience:

- An ambitious and long-lasting partnership in Burlington, Kansas between school districts and government entities that pools resources for digital infrastructure and sparks innovation
- A set of competency-based public lab schools in Philadelphia and Allentown, Pennsylvania that are designed to build strong social infrastructure and encourage real-world learning
- An effort to empower caregivers to design digital opportunities and spaces to build school community in Oakland, California

Drawing on these case studies, a variety of other examples, and existing work and research on learning and community building, we offer a snapshot of the structural elements that can propel multidimensional infrastructure thinking and design in school communities. These elements include:

- A deep foundation of trust and partnership between stakeholders
- A shared vision and corresponding metrics that are jointly developed by stakeholders
- An analysis and plan for leveraging the vast array of assets that community members, institutions, and schools offer
- An understanding of gaps between existing and needed assets, and a plan for filling those gaps in ways that are consistent with community priorities
- A commitment to flexibility and evolution, and careful consideration of how to make programs sustainable and effective in the long-term

Community members of all sorts are key to dreaming, designing, and implementing holistic and multidimensional approaches to schools. We lay out a vision for how funders can engage these community members and leverage their unique positions to propel this work. That vision includes taking risks, remaining flexible, bringing together stakeholders who are normally siloed, following the community's lead, and sharing learnings with other communities. By doing so, we hope to shift what's possible for school communities. Thoughtful philanthropic investment offers opportunities for school communities to experiment and demonstrate the value of their approaches, leading to increased public sector funding and systems-change that comes from the community itself.

We at Siegel Family Endowment hope that this white paper can act as an invitation to learn, share, partner, and chart how far a multidimensional lens can take us in creating change in education.

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