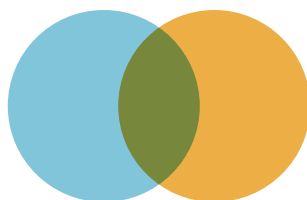


CommunityShare

Reimagining School-Community Relationships to
Ignite Student and Community Engagement



PRESENTED BY SIEGEL FAMILY ENDOWMENT

We are a foundation focused on understanding
and shaping the impact of technology on society.

About Siegel

Siegel Family Endowment employs an inquiry-driven approach to grant making that is informed by the scientific method and predicated on the belief that philanthropy is uniquely positioned to address some of the most pressing and complex issues facing society today. Our grant making strategy positions us to be society's risk capital. We support high quality work that will help us derive insights to timely questions and has high potential for future scale. Our focus is on organizations doing work at the intersection of learning, workforce, and infrastructure. We aim to help build a world in which all people have the tools, skills, and context necessary to engage meaningfully in a rapidly changing society. Siegel Family Endowment was founded in 2011 by David M. Siegel, co-founder and co-chairman of financial sciences company Two Sigma.

Our Focus on Learning

We strive to understand how we can better equip individuals with the knowledge they need to contribute to and engage with a rapidly changing society. Yet, we also recognize that every factor in a learner's education—from broadband access to safe and affordable housing to the development of social-emotional skills—can widen inequality and impact success. Our work supports and shapes programs and solutions that build lifelong learning opportunities and envision an education system that works for everyone, by addressing long standing social and economic inequities.

Schools as Community Infrastructure

For schools to become the most effective and powerful versions of themselves, it's critical to understand their place within and connection to the communities they serve, and how both systems—school and community—must be strengthened in tandem. Using a multidimensional framing for school allows us to consider their infrastructure needs in a holistic way that elevates the school community's strengths and resources, and identifies needs that remain unmet. By conceptualizing and conceiving of schools as bigger than the buildings in which they operate, we have an opportunity to expand what schools can do, and ensure that they are set up to do that critical work.



About Grantee

COMMUNITYSHARE ignites civic engagement and a passion for learning by activating the wisdom and lived experiences of educators, students, and community members. The organization connects PreK-12 educators with community partners—people in the community who can share their unique experiences, interests, and skills—to work on real-world projects that help students develop durable, transferable skills while bolstering student engagement, connection, and sense of belonging. Educators are often eager to build community partnerships but frequently have neither the time to search for partners nor the training to co-design projects with partners. CommunityShare has developed a research-based model to address both of these challenges.

CommunityShare's digital matching platform acts as a "human library," connecting educators and their students to community partners who serve as mentors, speakers, and content experts to support student-driven, real-world learning. In addition,



Through this CommunityShare project, students designed and created their own custom-built photo booth using a Raspberry Pi microcomputer with mentorship from a local IT expert.

CommunityShare provides professional learning and tools, including coaching, workshops, and an in-depth national fellowship to ensure educators have the skills, support, and tools to co-design real-world learning experiences that reflect the interests of students as well as educators' instructional goals.

CommunityShare collaborates with school districts, municipalities, community organizations, and other partners around the country to build their long-term capacity to scale school-community partnerships. These communities are part of a robust national network of regional learning ecosystems that share their challenges, successes, and lessons learned through a community of practice facilitated by CommunityShare.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Breaking down the barriers between schools and communities can help drive student engagement, build social capital, and better prepare students for work and life after school.** Real-world learning opportunities are critical if students are going to have the relationships, skills, and support to thrive as members of society. Community members can play an important role in supporting this real-world learning—but only if they are woven into the fabric of the school community. Educators are vital as the connectors between the school and community.
- **Technology offers a critical tool for developing a regional learning ecosystem, but humans are essential for building the relationships that activate and nurture these ecosystems.** Online platforms can reveal, organize, connect, and democratize access to social capital, allowing students and educators to develop relationships and learn skills that they otherwise would not have access to. However, human support needs to accompany any deployment of online tools.
- **It's not enough for a school district or other organization to want to partner with the community;** for these partnerships to succeed, a community must have the human capacity, sense of stewardship, and abundance mindset to build relationships for outreach that are reciprocally beneficial. Schools need to demonstrate a pedagogical commitment to student-driven, real-world learning, and individuals and organizations in the community must have a desire and commitment to engage in schools, among other factors.

EDUCATOR PROFILE**Rosa Alvarez**

ELD Teacher and Site Program Coordinator, Sopori Elementary School, Sahuarita Unified School District, Arizona



A FEW YEARS AGO, Rosa Alvarez, a veteran elementary school English Language Development (ELD) teacher, rushed into Walmart to buy a microphone. There had been a change in testing format and Alvarez's elementary school students now needed to record their spoken answers. Alvarez's students were fascinated with the tabletop, podcast microphone that Alvarez brought back from the store. "They absolutely loved it," Alvarez recalls.

Simultaneously, Alvarez was in the process of developing a concept for a CommunityShare project for students to gain real-world experience using their skills as multilingual learners and build 21st-century skills. It was one of Alvarez's students who made the connection between the microphone and some of the intergenerational projects that Alvarez was considering. "An

older-grade-level student said, 'You know what would be really cool? If we did a community podcast! We already have the microphone!'" The other students—across all grade levels—were equally enthusiastic. "The versatility of the project makes it easy for any student, from kindergarten through fifth grade, to find how to meaningfully contribute," Alvarez reflects.

With support through a year-long CommunityShare fellowship led by educators at Sahuarita Unified School District, Alvarez worked with CommunityShare to make her students' vision a reality, involving students every step of the way. The project emerged from the district's focus on connecting classroom learning with real-world applications and community partnerships that build 21st-century skills.

During class, students oriented their learning around podcast development. Listening, reading, writing, and speaking assignments took on new significance with the students' new goal of producing a podcast. Students who were once hesitant to speak in English began to take on interviewer roles with growing confidence, eager to share their perspectives and stories. "We did a lot of reading through podcasts. We did video. We thought about who we would want to have on a podcast and what questions we would ask them. We practiced interviewing," Alvarez says.

Alvarez partnered with a podcast host at the local NPR affiliate who introduced students to the technical elements of podcasting. In addition, Beth Puma, a multilingual specialist from

the community, helped connect podcast development with student learning objectives through the use of inquiry cycles and structured conversations about the power of questioning. Puma reflected, "The students' excitement for their podcast project was contagious. They have powerful stories to share. It also helped me understand the realities of small rural schools in Arizona."

The first year of the project culminated in a field trip to CATalyst Studios, the professional sound studio housed at the University of Arizona. Alvarez says that the visit was inspiring for her students. "I wanted the students to have the real-life experience of everything we had been practicing throughout that year," Alvarez says. "Students got to record a snippet of a podcast intro. It was the ultimate culmination of all of our learning."

In the second year of her CommunityShare project, Alvarez built upon that foundation of learning to help students build and use a professional podcast studio of their own in a space adjacent to Alvarez's classroom. "It was the opportunity of a lifetime," Alvarez says. In addition to continuing to work on their language and critical thinking skills, students learned about budgeting, design, and technology. Alvarez is still figuring out what year three of her CommunityShare project will bring, but she forecasts great things ahead. "Seeing this podcast come to life, and staying true to my instructional goals and staying true to students' desires has been amazing," Alvarez says. "This work has been the greatest joy."

Executive Summary

The idea for [COMMUNITYSHARE](#) was seeded when Josh Schachter, a teaching artist and professional photographer in Tucson, Arizona, emailed a group of English language learner (ELL) teachers to see if any wanted to collaborate with a photographer in supporting students' literacy skills. Schachter recalls, "Only one teacher responded out of all the ELL teachers I emailed." Out of that email exchange Josh and ELL educator Julie Kasper developed a project collaboration that supported multilingual high school students—primarily immigrants and refugees—to document the meaning of "home" through images and words. Schachter and Kasper were deeply disheartened to see that the vast majority of students chose to photograph scenes of isolation and disconnection.

Schachter says their images "invited us to explore how we could build a stronger connection between our community and our students." Over eight years, Schachter and Kasper engaged more than 100 community members—community "partners"—on real-world projects driven by students' interests. What Schachter had not anticipated is that when he left working with the school, so did



much of the social capital he had helped develop. He began to wonder if there was a more sustainable and equitable way to grow a network of social capital that was not so dependent on a single individual. That question evolved into [CommunityShare](#), an organization that matches educators and students with members of the community who can share their wisdom, expertise, passions, and skills.

Over time, CommunityShare has evolved from a series of projects in the Tucson area

Driven by our curiosities, interests and passions

Enriched by the knowledge, skills, wisdom and unique assets within our communities

To make authentic contributions to our individual and collective well-being

to a nonprofit organization that works with a national network of regional learning ecosystems across nearly a dozen states to bridge the gap between schools and community. CommunityShare provides a research-backed model, including three key components. First, CommunityShare's [digital matching platform](#) or "human library" allows PreK-12 educators to more easily access and connect with members of their local community who can serve as mentors and project collaborators in their classrooms. Second, CommunityShare offers professional learning opportunities and resources for educators including coaching, workshops, project guides, and a host of resources to support educators in implementing real-world learning programs in collaboration with community members. For educators eager to deepen their practice, CommunityShare's National Educator Fellowship offers an immersive, collaborative experience in community-engaged learning. Third, CommunityShare offers [capacity-building services](#) for educational and community organizations who are partnering to launch CommunityShare initiatives in their learning ecosystems. This support ranges from asset mapping to community engagement to participatory storytelling to evaluation. CommunityShare has also developed a data dashboard that enables districts and communities to track in real time activity in their ecosystem—who is connecting with whom, the impact of those connections, and what gaps and trends are emerging.



Middle school educator, Jackie Nichols, works with a student in developing 3D models of cities of the future. Students engaged with professionals and mentors throughout the year to research, develop, and present their ideas for how cities can operate more sustainably 100 years from now.

EDUCATOR PROFILE

Shannon Fojtik

English and Composition Teacher
Sunnyside High School, Sunnyside
Unified School District, Arizona



HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER and CommunityShare educator fellow Shannon Fojtik's biggest hope for her students is that they never stop asking questions. "I want my students to find things in the world that we live in and keep poking at them to get more information, get more sides of the story, and not accept what they see at face value," says Fojtik, an English and composition teacher at Sunnyside High School in Tucson, Arizona.

As a former journalist, Fojtik is well-positioned to help students channel their curiosity into the community around them. In her journalism career, one reporting assignment gave Fojtik a model for the types of community explorations that she now asks her students to pursue. For the assignment, Fojtik uncovered the history of a cemetery that had been bulldozed for development in the early twentieth century. "People don't realize that they are interacting with this history on a daily basis, and that what happened then impacts people right now," Fojtik reflects, pointing to ongoing structural problems in housing as a result of the development of the cemetery site.

Just as she did in her cemetery investigation, Fojtik asks her high school students to reflect on the world around them. Earlier in her career, Fojtik brought students to a

cave after reading Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and took students to a nuclear missile silo after reading the post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*.

In recent years, Fojtik's community engagement work has deepened. Her twelfth-grade composition students conduct extensive research projects and write mini-dissertations about something in the community that has been forgotten or overlooked. With Fojtik's support, students find local experts on their topics. Fojtik breaks the projects down into categories and organizes field trips for each category. The project allows students to explore topics of personal and cultural relevance and participate in real-world field experiences.

Through CommunityShare, Fojtik connected with a diverse network of local experts, historians, storytelling mentors, and more who made the topics real and relevant for her students and herself as a teacher. Last year, Fojtik took students on seven different field trips, from exploring a ghost town to visiting a historic neighborhood and a mine. "Last year I had 107 kids, and I had 107 different topics for what these kids felt like was not being given enough attention within their communities," Fojtik says, explaining that she did not give prompting for the types of sites, issues, or topics that would qualify. "It was amazing to see the variety."

She saw the growth and impact for her students as they pushed past their shyness, asked deeper questions, and began to see that their voices and the narratives they were writing mattered in their community. "Everyone's lives right now are so digital, there's a tangible part of learning that gets missed," Fojtik reflects. "No matter what the subject is, getting students out into their community to experience things, research them, and see them in person is so important."

Fojtik, who is completing the final stages of her doctoral dissertation on community-connected learning, sees this approach as part of a broader, needed shift to authentic, relevant, and student-centered learning. "CommunityShare is

definitely a bridge to getting education somewhere that works. Teachers have so many roadblocks to making education accessible and meaningful. CommunityShare helps take away some of those roadblocks and makes it more possible," she shares. "At the end of the day, we want to give our students all these tools so they can be ready to go into the world as best as they can."

As a member of Sunnyside Unified School District's CommunityShare educator fellowship, Fojtik was able to smooth some of the logistical and resource challenges of coordinating so many projects and field trips. Fojtik says that funding from the fellowship went toward field trip transportation costs and that she was able to use CommunityShare's "digital human library" to identify local experts who could help students with their projects. Participating in the district-supported fellowship also made Fojtik's work more visible within her school, and the message behind her project helped to secure additional funding from the principal's discretionary fund.

Equally important, the CommunityShare fellowship gave Fojtik a supportive community of practice. "If we want education to be effective for future generations, this method of learning is going to be one of the most—if not the most—effective way for kids to learn and be ready to be contributing members of society," Fojtik says. "But it has to be a team effort. You can only do so much as a teacher without support. The admin support is a huge component of what makes CommunityShare effective."

In the end, Fojtik says that the best part of this approach to teaching is learning from her students and empowering them to ask their own questions. "I've grown up in Tucson my whole life, and I didn't know most of this stuff was here until I was figuring it out with my students," Fojtik continues, "These kids need to keep asking questions, and keep learning more things. That is where their power comes from."



Left: Educator Rosa Alvarez's students visit CATalyst Studios, the professional sound studio housed at the University of Arizona. Right: Students work on building their own podcast studio back at their elementary school.

Core Elements: What Makes the Program Work?

THERE IS a tension in CommunityShare's growth. On the one hand, the organization has hit on a model that can enhance students' sense of belonging and develop critical skills and that ought to be accessible to learning ecosystems across the country. On the other hand, CommunityShare's success hinges on a deep understanding of and connection to the local community in which its model is deployed. CommunityShare balances the two by developing scalable tools, practices, and approaches that build local capacity such that local organizations and districts can implement CommunityShare's model in a way that honors and responds to the local conditions, needs, and assets of each community.

Breaking Down Barriers Between Schools and Communities

THE STUDENTS that Schachter first worked with who photographed their experiences of "home" reported feeling disconnected and isolated. Unfortunately, that feeling of isolation is common among students in the United States. A significant portion of students—particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds—[feel disconnected](#) from their school communities. For their part, teenagers

[report](#) being disengaged from school, often because they don't see a connection between school and their lives and careers. In fifth grade 74% of students are actively engaged in school; by twelfth grade engagement drops to 34%. That's a problem for many reasons—not least of which is because student engagement is correlated with improved performance in school. Addressing this gap is critical.

CommunityShare aims to address all of these areas simultaneously, building real-world relationships and offering students opportunities for hands-on learning that shows the relevance of school for students' lives and careers. Equally important, these real-world learning experiences offer students an opportunity to contribute their passions, agency and skills to their own communities. Projects have included the following:

- University faculty and students mentored middle and high schoolers in using geospatial technology to research and map sustainability challenges in their own neighborhood.
- A cabinetmaker worked with middle schoolers to design and build a full dining set from scratch for a family moving into a domestic violence shelter.

- Middle schoolers teamed up with a gardening entrepreneur and county staff to design agrivoltaic systems that boost crop yields for local food banks.
- An ecologist mentored middle schoolers in using drone technology to monitor and improve desert water quality.

Melinda Englert, CommunityShare's director of communication, says that educators are at "the heart of CommunityShare's work, which was developed by educators for educators." The model offers educators an opportunity to expand and differentiate their role, stepping into the position of facilitator and collaborator rather than sole source of knowledge. By bringing community partners into the learning process, educators can share expertise and perspectives, lighten the burden of having to know everything, and learn alongside their students. At the same time, students begin to see themselves as active agents in their own learning, taking ownership of their curiosity, learning, and discoveries.

"My experience with all of the partners I've worked with through CommunityShare has been life-changing because I can still wear the hat of a student, and bring in experts for my students. We can grow together. I'm not

EDUCATOR PROFILE**Cynthia Lopez****Chemistry Teacher**

Desert View High School,
Sunnyside Unified School
District, Arizona



CYNTHIA LOPEZ has been teaching for over a decade but she admits that she had butterflies in her stomach the night before her chemistry students tested alternatives to trichloroethylene (TCE), the toxic compound linked to deadly cancers and other illnesses.

"To be honest, I was really, really nervous," Lopez says. With her district's adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), Lopez had already shifted her lessons to be more student-centered and directed. But Lopez says that this was the first time that she had asked students to design and execute their own investigations in the lab.

Lopez calmed her nerves by reminding herself that she had prepared her students for the lab experiments they were set to perform. "We had protocols in place. I had ordered the materials that they were going to run with. We had done the research. We had gone through a process to narrow down the top three alternatives to TCE that we could test," Lopez recalls.

There was another reason

that Lopez felt confident in her students' ability to successfully test their TCE alternatives: the project was personal for Lopez and her students. They lived in a neighborhood that was still suffering the effects of TCE water contamination brought on by the extensive use of TCE to clean airplanes at the local airport. Students spent the months leading up to their chemistry lab investigations learning about that history and its ongoing effects on their community through lessons that Lopez developed as part of a year-long CommunityShare educator fellowship in Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) that is led and facilitated by SUSD educators.

For her CommunityShare project, Lopez taught lessons on the chemistry of TCE, the science showing TCE's danger, and the policies that existed or could be developed to limit TCE's use. Lopez also brought people engaged in the fight against TCE on Tucson's Southside to her classroom: Rick Gonzales, the attorney who successfully mounted a lawsuit against Hughes Aircraft Company; Beki Quintero, a local activist and a member of the Sunnyside Unified School District governing board; and Daniel Sullivan, a scientist at the University of Arizona who had studied the impact of the TCE water contamination on the collective mental health of the community.

The experience of interacting with people in their own community who were working for environmental justice was eye-opening for students. "They were amazed at how it affected—and how it continues to affect—the community that they live in," Lopez says.

One speaker asked students how they felt about what they were learning. "There was silence and

then they started raising their hands," Lopez recalls. "They said, 'We had no idea.' A lot of them said, 'Now that we know, we need to advocate for our community.' One student said, 'This was a really good example of how we hold people accountable for environmental issues.'"

Connecting the project to relevant, real-world implications of chemistry transformed her students' engagement in the classroom and beyond it, as students were bringing what they were learning home and into the community. "They were engaged to a level that I had never seen before," Lopez says. "I've always wanted them to go back and tell their families what they learned in chemistry today, but I've never really experienced that before. Students were going home and telling their family members or parents or aunts, just almost anyone about what they were learning. And then their family was telling them, 'Oh, I do remember that.' They were starting this dialogue, and the kids were so excited to come back and kind of fill me in on what they were talking about."

Bringing the project full circle, Lopez connected with local artists, who were engaging the community to create tiles for a mosaic to honor the lives lost and impacted by TCE contamination. "It brought closure to our project. It started with the community, and then we ended with that focus on people and community," Lopez says.

Lopez has already applied to participate in another CommunityShare project next year. She isn't sure what next year's project will entail, but Lopez is sure of one thing: learning with and from the community has both transformed the way that her students think about science and how she sees her own role as a teacher.

overwhelmed by having my students say, ‘We want to learn robotics and gardening.’ CommunityShare has removed barriers for me so that when my students have curious ideas, together, we can create a project and bring in an expert to help support that learning. I think that is one of the best gifts that I can give myself, another educator, and my students. We have an entire community of mentors and leaders out there that are willing to share their talents,” shared Nova Klein, a CommunityShare educator.

Technology as a Tool, Not an End Goal

COMMUNITYSHARE developed [a digital platform](#)—a “human library”—to allow PreK-12 educators to find local community members with skills and passions to share with students. The online tool has obvious benefits. It enables educators to post project ideas and then are matched with community members—artists, STEM professionals, entrepreneurs, government and nonprofit staff, researchers, parents and others—they wouldn’t otherwise know or have access to. It allows community members to contribute their professional skills and life experiences in meaningful ways with students and schools they don’t know personally.

This work is not without its challenges.

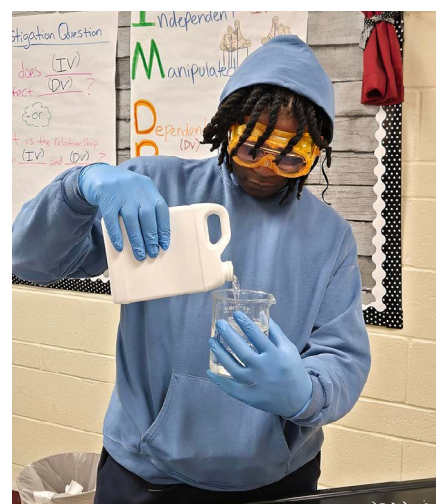
Schachter reflects, “As more organizations heard about our platform they wanted it to mobilize their community for them. We had to emphasize that technology does not build relationships; that’s a human endeavor.” As a result, CommunityShare has shifted its messaging around the digital platform. “Originally, we said, ‘Here’s a tech thing that you can use.’ But the goal was never the technology. The goal was to use technology in service of building community,” Schachter says. “CommunityShare’s bigger purpose is to engage caring adults in the lives of young people. There are a lot of ways we can do that. One of the ways is through the tech platform.”

Preparing for Regional Learning Ecosystem Development

COMMUNITYSHARE has developed other methods for setting educators and partners up for success. “As we expanded to more places, we realized we had not thought thoroughly enough about the readiness conditions, such as pedagogical alignment and local staff capacity to build community partnerships,” Schachter says. “Over time we have developed a framework that enables us to more effectively assess if folks are a good fit for our work.” The framework addresses questions such as the following:

- Is there enough **capacity** locally to do outreach, engage, and mobilize the community?
- Is there an alignment in **pedagogical philosophy** (i.e., a commitment to real-world learning, experiential learning, project-based learning, work-based learning, etc.)?
- Does this work **support existing goals**, initiatives, and priorities at the school, district, and/or community level, so that it is not seen as another new initiative?
- Is there **excitement** in the community and/or evidence that the business, higher education, nonprofit, or other type of community anchor is already committed to engaging with students, educators, and schools in a reciprocal way?

Schachter explains that the evolution of the readiness framework is a demonstration of CommunityShare’s commitment to learning alongside its partners—just as students, educators, and community members learn from each other. “We don’t have all the answers,” Schachter says, “It’s been wonderful to learn with our partners. That learning is helping us be better at what we’re doing. And it’s also helping the folks we partner with grow, too.”



Left: High school students in Cynthia Lopez’s class visit the University of Arizona as part of their research into TCE and alternative chemistry solutions. Right: High school student back at the school chemistry lab to carry out an investigation.

EDUCATOR PROFILE

Jackie Nichols

STEM Engineering/Future City and 6th Grade Social Science Teacher

Billy Lane Lauffer Middle School, Sunnyside Unified School District, Arizona



JACKIE NICHOLS, a sixth grade social science and STEM teacher in Tucson, Arizona, wants her students to do more than learn and apply scientific concepts. She wants to inspire her students to consider careers in science and technology. But in her twenty years of teaching, Nichols has found that making her students see STEM careers as a viable path is easier said than done.

Nichols explains, "I teach in a Title I district and in a school where 95 percent of students identify as Latino, Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican-American. The students that I teach don't necessarily have representation of engineers, scientists, and researchers in their families...yet."

About a decade ago, Nichols began to fill that void by asking community members to come to her classroom to share their experiences with students. "I wanted my students to begin to see themselves in those professional lives, and also to provide expertise in the areas where I didn't have background knowledge," Nichols says.

Nichols joined the first CommunityShare community of

practice for educators interested in project-based learning nine years ago and has run a CommunityShare classroom and been an advocate for the model ever since.

Nichols' CommunityShare projects have evolved over the years, growing more expansive and involving more community partners over time. One of Nichols' most ambitious projects involved a partnership with faculty at the University of Arizona (UA) who brought expertise in green infrastructure and social justice. Together, UA faculty, students, Nichols, and two additional educators in Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) co-created a year-long CommunityShare project in which 80 middle school students were mentored by SUSD high school students, and both sets of students were mentored by UA undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and community professionals.

The students learned GIS (geospatial information systems) technology to research and map social justice issues that students identify in the southside of Tucson as it relates to access to parks and green infrastructure. All 80 students visited the UA campus—most for the first time—and met with UA students and faculty. They also had the opportunity to meet GIS experts and green infrastructure experts at the City of Tucson and Pima County. This project not only increased their understanding of the value of higher education but also expanded their access to BIPOC university faculty and professionals in the community. Students began to see themselves in these spaces and professions. At the end of the project, Nichols and her SUSD teacher colleagues [co-authored a peer-reviewed article in the Journal of STEM Outreach](#) with the UA faculty and CommunityShare.

The students in Nichols' current

STEM competition classes are exploring farm-to-table techniques. "We have farmers, landscape architects, engineers, and leaders in the local zero-waste sustainable communities movement come to the classroom. We even have a James Beard Award-winning baker visiting!" Nichols says. She looks for community partners who will connect with students and share their stories—sometimes in both Spanish and English.

"It's been transformative," Nichols reflects. Many of Nichols' former students have gone on to pursue STEM majors in college—a fact that she attributes to the CommunityShare experience.

Five years ago, Nichols took on a new role as a mentor for educators new to the CommunityShare model. Sunnyside Unified School District—the Tucson-area school district where Nichols teaches—became a CommunityShare partner with support from local philanthropic funders. Alongside her own teaching responsibilities, Nichols now co-leads the district's fellowship program for educators who are developing CommunityShare projects in their classrooms. In that role, Nichols helps educators develop a project, align their project with learning standards, troubleshoot problems, make connections with community partners, and learn pedagogies that allow for more student-directed learning.

When asked how the CommunityShare fellowship has played out in her school district, Nichols is direct: "It's been wonderful," Nichols says, noting that teachers across a wide variety of subjects and grade levels have mounted successful projects. "This program is about supporting positive changes, and helping students find their voice for the things that they're passionate about," Nichols says. "If I can be a part of that movement, then I'm happy to be in that place."

Impact

TO DATE, CommunityShare has connected more than 85,000 students to meaningful, real-world learning experiences. However, CommunityShare staff recognize that it's important to consider other measures of impact beyond this single number.

As an organization that bridges schools with the wider community, CommunityShare sits at the intersection of differing systems for measuring impact. On the one hand, schools must collect learning outcome data to demonstrate student progress and proficiency in traditional academic subjects. On the other hand, afterschool programs and other community nonprofits often rely on other measures of success: the number of volunteers, participants' satisfaction with their experience, and participants' feelings about their community, for example. Meanwhile employers want to know if students are developing the durable and technical skills to be ready for the workforce.

CommunityShare brings these visions of impact together. As Schachter explains, "We ask ourselves, 'What do we believe that young people need to be successful humans in life?' Then we look for the metrics that are aligned with that." Schachter points to the disconnect between what schools typically measure and the skills that employers say are most important for success on the job. It's that divide that CommunityShare aims to fill:

Engagement: [Research](#) shows that student engagement has a profound effect on student learning outcomes. When students are disengaged, they are less likely to attend class, more likely to drop out of school and engage in risky behaviors, and tend not to demonstrate proficiency on academic standards when compared with students who are more engaged.

In a recent survey, 98% of CommunityShare educators reported an increase in student engagement. One educator reported that "students who are absent a lot were more likely to be there on days they knew we were working on the CommunityShare project."

CommunityShare educators also consistently see increased student agency as a result of the real-world relevance and



Students from Sunnyside Unified School District visited the University of Arizona as part of a year-long, multi-tiered STEM mentoring experience.

community connections of their projects. One educator noted, "My students were very motivated by the CommunityShare project. At the start of the school year, 12% of my students were performing above grade level, but by the end, 94% were performing above grade level."

College- and career-readiness:

CommunityShare helps students develop durable, transferable skills—such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving—that can help them to be successful in future careers and as members of society. Schachter explains that because CommunityShare works from PreK-12, their programs allow students to begin this process of developing college- and career-readiness skills far earlier than high school.

"Through community-engaged learning, students are developing durable skills very early on in their school careers, feeding deeper engagement that will carry them to success in other areas of life and learning," Schachter says.

According to surveys of educators, 96% of students developed critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration skills and 87% of students showed increased career and college readiness as a result of participation in CommunityShare. In addition, [research](#) has shown students who participated in a CommunityShare youth mentoring program for middle and high school students were more likely to express interest in STEM careers and higher education than their counterparts who did not participate. Researchers found that participants were

EDUCATOR PROFILE**Latoya Jones****Third Grade Teacher and
Mentor Teacher**

Edison Elementary School,
Phoenix Elementary School
District 1, Arizona



LAST YEAR, the principal of Edison Elementary School in Phoenix approached third grade teacher Latoya Jones with information about CommunityShare's national educator fellowship program. "He said, 'Community is your thing,' and I agreed that community really is my thing," Jones says laughing.

Jones has spent eighteen years teaching third grade in Phoenix. In that time, she's gotten to know the community, even now teaching the children of children she previously taught. "Community is one of my core values," Jones says.

Even so, Jones has sometimes found it difficult to integrate the larger community into her school community. "I'm in a Title I low-income school, and kids are used to things in these four blocks." Jones says that experience is equally true of families. She explains that on an annual field trip to visit Indigenous ruins, parent chaperones often expressed surprise that the site

existed. "Parents said, 'I didn't even know this was here!' And it's right around the corner," Jones recalls.

In the past, Jones has tried to bridge that divide by having community members visit her classroom. But she says it's been challenging to find people who didn't already have an immediate connection to the school. "Getting companies to come—not just to donate things—but to come and share with the kids about their career is hard," Jones reflects.

The CommunityShare fellowship gave Jones effective strategies for tackling that challenge, a structured framework for thinking about how to build bridges between classrooms and community, and a cohort of educators who were equally passionate about the subject.

"We were talking to so many different educators from different experiences and backgrounds, and all over the world. It was like having a library of teachers that I had access to," Jones says of the fellowship. "On top of that, we had a library of resources of different stakeholders in different communities, pretty much around the world," Jones adds, referring to CommunityShare's online platform for matching community members with educators to co-create real-world learning opportunities.

With support from CommunityShare, Jones launched an ambitious sustainability project with third and fourth graders at her school, aligning the project to science and social studies standards. Jones brought in leaders from a local nonprofit organization to co-create a plan for planting dozens of new trees at the school. Students researched what the planned varieties of trees would

look like years in the future and then created a plan for where the trees should be planted in order to maximize shade. Leaders at the nonprofit were so impressed by the students' enthusiasm that they nearly doubled the number of trees that they committed to planting, resulting in 43 new trees on campus.

Families were equally enthusiastic. "Through CommunityShare, I learned to interview kids, to get their buy-in first," Jones says. "The kids were so excited that they told their parents and parents asked me whether they could come. For the families who live around here, these are their trees, this really belongs to them." Jones coordinated a family tree planting celebration. She recalls, "Parents who I never saw before came to help dig holes."

The trees that the students and their families planted are still young, but Jones hopes that alumni will come back to visit and check-in on their progress. She's also excited about the outdoor classroom that was created as part of the sustainability initiative and is already thinking about ways to expand her CommunityShare work in years to come.

But Jones says that the biggest impact of the CommunityShare fellowship is not in the particular project she pursued, but in the questions that she asks her students. "I stopped asking the kids what they want to be when they grow up. I started asking them, 'What problems are there in the world that you want to solve?'" Jones says. "It's all about getting the kids to have more agency, to know how big the world is, and that they can be a part of it."



High school students worked with staff at the University of Arizona to build a chicken coop on their high school campus and learned construction, agriculture and ecology.

more likely to understand the importance and usefulness of college when they saw STEM skills applied in real contexts.

Lexana, a former CommunityShare student, spoke to the power and long-term impacts of this kind of applied learning. “I used to think that engineering, science, and research were for smart people. Then I discovered that I’m ‘smart people.’” Lexana is now on a full scholarship studying engineering at Arizona State University.

Building relationships: [Research](#) shows that strong social networks are highly correlated with academic success and opportunities for achieving social mobility. Yet students from affluent families are much more likely to have strong social networks than students living in poverty. Schools can bridge this gap by helping students to develop relationships with members of the community. However, educators from high-poverty schools are more than twice as likely to [report](#) a lack of strong connection between school and community than their peers at low-poverty schools.

Through participation in CommunityShare, students develop strong social networks that can contribute to improved academic performance and increased opportunity. As an example, after a high school student

expressed to their career counselor a growing interest in chemistry, the counselor used the CommunityShare platform to connect the student to a local chemistry professor, who after providing some mentorship, created an internship for the student in the university chemistry lab.

As CommunityShare was originally developed by educators for educators, the organization also focuses on tracking impacts on educators themselves. These impacts range from increased retention and job satisfaction to shifts in pedagogical practice to the adoption of new mindsets. One educator noted, “Several educators have expressed how ‘done’ with teaching they were, and then they would come to the CommunityShare session and be surrounded by community and like-minded people and feel reinvigorated and ready to step into her classroom the next day.”

Ninety percent of surveyed CommunityShare educators reported feeling a significantly greater desire to keep teaching because of the program. Educators also reported significant impacts on teacher efficacy, including increased teacher collaboration opportunities, confidence in new pedagogical practices, improved instructional quality of student-centered experiences, and more meaningful community and family engagement.

Next Steps

COMMUNITYSHARE invites school and district leaders, educators, nonprofits, funders, community members, and others to learn more about its approach to connecting communities and classrooms for co-learning opportunities:

- 1 School districts, school networks, individual schools, community organizations, municipalities, coalitions and others who are interested in developing their own regional learning ecosystem can [reach out](#) to learn more about partnership opportunities with CommunityShare.
- 2 Educators who would like to learn more about CommunityShare’s professional learning opportunities, including their [National Educator Fellowship](#) and/or how to bring the CommunityShare platform to their school or community can visit the educator portion of CommunityShare’s [website](#) and [reach out](#) with more specific questions.
- 3 Community members who would like to share their unique gifts, experiences, and interests with students and educators can [create an account](#) in [communities](#) where CommunityShare already exists.
- 4 Community members who live and work in locations where CommunityShare’s platform isn’t currently operating can [reach out](#) to learn about bringing the program to their communities.
- 5 Philanthropic organizations who would like to learn more about CommunityShare and discuss funding opportunities can [reach out](#) to CommunityShare for more information at team@communityshare.org.

To learn more and contact Siegel Family Endowment, visit www.siegelendowment.org