School buildings communicate important messages to our children, their families, the community, and the educators and personnel that work there. A school’s physical appearance speaks to people about the value our society places on education and on the role of the school in the community. Too often, our urban school facilities send the wrong messages.

However, in communities with scarce resources, school facilities can play a particularly vital role. We call them community schools. They:

- create a safe and supportive school culture and a climate for learning in the school and community;
- develop engaging learning experiences inside and outside the classroom that enable students to prepare for college, career, and life;
- ensure that young people have the opportunities and supports that every family seeks for their children—mentoring, after school and summer activities, arts and cultural events, health and mental health services, nutritious meals, and more;
- engage families and communities in problem-solving of pressing community issues; and

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends. Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities.
- build social capital—the networks and relationships so critical to helping young people develop the ‘agency’ they need to face life’s challenges and become productive workers and citizens.

Community schools bring the assets of the community into the school facility. Depending on the local context, community schools might house a library, a career center, doctors, dentists, social services, recreational spaces, or after school and weekend programs. In a community school, families, educators, and communities are equal decision-makers. When the design of school space is built on community input, and includes services and activities that young people, families, and communities need, the community school becomes a vibrant resource for all.

There is a long history of seeing school buildings as centers of communities. In the early 1900s John Dewey, the famous Progressive educator, wrote about schools as social centers. He envisioned schools as a gathering place for people to learn from one another and throughout their lives regardless of age. That ideal continues today and is manifested best when school buildings become community schools.

**Cincinnati Community Learning Centers**

Many school districts and communities are using the school building to transform communities. Cincinnati’s community schools, called Community Learning Centers (CLCs), illustrate how school and community leaders leveraged new funding for school construction to engage the community and to promote fairness and opportunity.

In 1999, Cincinnati Public Schools Facility Master Plan invested $1 billion to rebuild its public schools and turn them into community hubs, with resources and opportunities for all. Central to the district’s effort was to engage each neighborhood in a conversation about what they wanted their schools to look like. The conversation led to schools co-located community partners that promote academic excellence and provide recreational, educational, social, health, civic, and cultural opportunities for students, their families, and the community. And in several cases schools became K-12 facilities in response to a community demand.
How did this happen? Each school community decided which opportunities and supports they wanted based on local needs and assets. For example, when a community identified access to health care as a critical need, the CLC was designed to house a health clinic. When another community needed high quality early childhood opportunities, planners incorporated space for an early childhood center.

What results do we see from Cincinnati’s facilities plan and community engagement? The school board has made all schools CLCs, Cincinnati students have demonstrated significant academic improvement, neighborhoods are being revitalized and more families are moving back to the city. And there are myriad of strong partnerships with community groups, business, and others that are all working inside school buildings to create places were all children and families succeed.

An emerging example of a substantial investment in school facilities come from Baltimore. The State of Maryland has recently passed a $1 billion facilities plan to revitalize Baltimore’s public school buildings. As Michael Sarbanes, former Baltimore City Schools’ Executive Director of Engagement, stated, “...this work is based on the belief that schools are an anchor in the community and the schools should be an asset for community life where they’re located.”

School Facility as a Community School

So what are school facilities like around the country and what vision can we create for better school facilities that encourage better learning? A recent report, the Condition of America’s Public School Facilities: 2012–13, states that over half of our public schools require “repairs, renovations, and modernizations to put the school’s onsite buildings in good overall condition.” The report estimates that it will require $197 billion, or $4.5 million per school to revitalize our schools.

Policymakers responsible for funding repairs to existing buildings or for funding new facilities should keep two things in mind:

1. Robust citizen participation in the planning process is essential to designing schools that are deeply rooted in community and responsive to its needs;
2. The way we design schools is a key factor in mobilizing the entire community to support young people.

Using the school facility as a community school is the way to achieve our ideals of the school as a social center, a place that values learning at all ages, and that creates equitable opportunities for all.