



**Advancing Health Equity in Multnomah County, Oregon:
SUN Community Schools Case Study**

Roza Do
CP256
Prof. Jason Corburn
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Introduction

SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Community Schools in Multnomah County are core full-service neighborhood hubs where schools and partners from across the community come together to ensure youth and families have the resources and support they need to be successful in school and in life. The continuation and expansion of integrated health and education programs provided by SUN Community Schools is a policy priority in Multnomah County's Health Equity Initiative. This paper will present a case study of SUN Community Schools describing the history, structure and core components of the framework, as well as the indicators and methods used to track progress toward greater equity. SUN's lesson learned to date will also be discussed along with considerations for further aligning their community schools with the County's Health Equity Initiative.

Schools Matter for Health Equity

Public schools are vital to the social and physical infrastructure of neighborhoods and cities. The location and quality of schools have a multitude of impacts on community and economic development and the health and safety of young people.¹ Research has shown a strong correlation between areas with high levels of poverty, crime, and mobility and low student achievement. Despite these challenges, studies also show that supportive neighborhoods can mitigate the harmful effects of economic disadvantage on students and form the foundation for high achievement.² In neighborhoods characterized by poverty, dilapidated housing and public infrastructure, and inadequate public services, public schools represent a beacon of hope despite the limited educational resources and support in these places. The lack of access to opportunity including conditions that promote health and learning is by design, not by random chance, as a result of a historical legacy of policies and practices that have created persistent patterns of injustice, particularly for low-income communities and communities of color.

To understand why schools matter for reversing these inequities, it is important to first introduce Multnomah County's health equity framework and how and its application to the school context. Health equity means achieving the highest level of health for all people by addressing the root causes of health disparities, also known as the social determinants of health, and equalizing the conditions for health for all groups, especially for those who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage or historical injustices.³ According to Multnomah County's Health Equity Initiative report, addressing the social determinants of health involves an intentional focus on upstream, midstream, and downstream factors.⁴ The upstream, or structural, factors driving health disparities include racism, classism, homophobia, and powerlessness, while midstream risk factors are a result of structural inequalities such as inadequate public transportation, lack of educational opportunities, and lack of economic resources. Downstream factors affecting health, where investment and interventions are heavily focused in the U.S., include health care access, service delivery and individuals'

behaviors and knowledge. Multnomah County recognizes that to eliminate health disparities and to achieve the highest possible level of health and well-being for people of all races and ethnicities means developing policies that explicitly address all three levels of the root causes of social and racial injustices that lead to health disparities in a coordinated way, and importantly, that strategies to improve health for Oregonians overall must be tailored to meet the unique needs of different population groups. Thus, applying a health equity framework with the school context is necessary to assess the disparities in opportunities and outcomes of all students and ensure that they are provided with targeted support and interventions so that they may all learn and succeed at the highest level regardless of race, socio-economic or family circumstances.

Community Schools Strategy

Schools districts, cities, and public agencies have largely operated independently in silos limiting their reach to effectively address the interconnected upstream, midstream, and downstream factors that create barriers to learning and success. As an essential community anchor institution, the school site can become a hub for partnerships and services that integrate academics, health, social services, and youth and community development to meet the comprehensive needs of students while also extending needed services and supports to their families and community members. This “full-service community school” approach addresses the multiple factors that heavily impact student achievement. As defined by the National Coalition for Community Schools, a community school is:

“both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. It’s integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities, leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings and weekends.”⁵

In short, community schools are a “one-stop-shop” that improves access to vital services to the people most at need. Importantly, “it is a strategy—not a program”⁶ or prescriptive model. There is no “one-size fits all” approach; each community school is elastic and evolves according to the unique needs and resources of the population and neighborhood environment. At the heart of this approach is a collaborative partnership among schools, cities, counties and community-based organizations driven by shared leadership toward a common vision and shared accountability; in other words, there is intentional alignment of resources and relationships toward improved results. In most cases, a lead organization coordinates the relationship between the school and community partners, bringing new expertise to the school and reducing the existing burden on school staff and the heavy demands of the school district. Based on a common set of principles, the goal is to create a comprehensive and supportive school environment, or *conditions for learning*⁷, necessary to help students develop the academic and social competencies to succeed in life (See Appendix A). Ultimately, school sites become a hub of opportunity for community partners, parents, students and school staff, and a community center for learning 21st century, real-world skills.

The community schools concept is not new as the idea of integrating education, health and social services has its roots in the settlement house movement and school-based reforms in the late 19th century⁸. Over the past century, community schools have grown and evolved out of the crumbling urban infrastructure and widening achievement gap in inner city public schools. In the early 1990's, various leaders emerged around the country to bring community agencies and support services into schools including social workers from the Children's Aid Society in New York; city and county officials in Portland, Oregon; and health providers and private foundations in California.⁹ Although a rigorous body of evidence of the impact of community schools is currently limited, the framework is becoming more recognized in the educational sphere as policy makers and practitioners across sectors are beginning to acknowledge its importance and to incorporate collaboration into their way of doing business. Additionally, there are federal programs¹⁰ that currently support significant elements of a community schools approach, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Choice Neighborhoods; the Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods, modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone, the Full Service Community Schools Program; the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, as well as foundation grants at the state-level including the James Irvine Foundation's California Linked Learning Initiative and the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities Initiative.

Although the concept of equity is implicit in the community school strategy, in most cases there is no explicit equity framework to anchor the strategy's development and implementation. According to reviews conducted by the Urban Strategies Council, the majority of community school evaluations fail to discuss the progress of the student subpopulations that experience disparate academic outcomes.¹¹

Multnomah County: SUN Community Schools

Multnomah County Community Schools and Health Equity Context

In the late 1990s, Multnomah County community members and leaders recognized a need for a new approach to respond to local needs. The environment posed multiple challenges including shrinking budgets, a significant racial achievement gap, growing poverty, a severe shortage of affordable housing, and an increase in the number of children being left unsupervised during out-of-school hours. Additionally, demographic changes were dramatically increasing the cultural and linguistic diversity in the region, requiring schools and social service organizations to develop new skills in order to educate and support these populations effectively.¹² Educational success and self-sufficiency are inherently issues of equity, and the SUN effort emerged as a strategy for achieving equity; however, during that time equity had not yet been made an explicit county-wide priority until 2007 under the leadership of former Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler in partnership with the Multnomah County Health Department with the launch of the Health Equity Initiative (HEI). Through this effort, the county collaborates with local organizations to support policy change that

addresses the root causes of socioeconomic and racial injustices and monitor results toward eliminating health disparities. Recognizing that existing efforts were already underway to address health equity, the SUN Community Schools effort was integrated into HEP's policy priorities in the areas of improving quality education, including job and life skills training; access to healthy foods and physical activity; and opportunities for minority scholarships and internships with local health systems.¹³ Before delving into how SUN Community Schools work to achieve health equity and lessons learned, the following section provides additional context on the history of the effort to shed light on the process that contributed to their growth and success.

SUN Community Schools History¹⁴

SUN Community Schools was founded in 1999 through a collaborative a partnership between the City of Portland, Multnomah County, the state, and local school districts. The decision for the City and County to partner together to support schools happened in 1998 with the initial goals of (1) *supporting education and school success* and (2) *improving the way resources for students and their families were delivered by developing a school-based delivery model*. To work toward this goal, an ad hoc committee was convened representing leadership from an existing County Community Building Initiative and a City-sponsored After School Cabinet. The committee met for seven months to design a model that built on existing assets in the community. They identified three key assets—one was the City Bureau of Parks and Recreation's successful school program that offered recreational activities at 13 sites; another asset was the County's history of providing school-based health and social services delivered through health clinics, family resource centers, case managers, and mental health workers; and a third key asset was the early work that local community-based organizations were doing to help build partnerships with schools. Although the City and County have experience partnering with schools, they had never systematically integrated and coordinated their efforts with each other.

The vision that emerged from the ad hoc committee was an expanded community school model that added educational activities and social services, and increased the involvement of families, community members and local business. The Parks Bureau has begun moving in this direction bringing partners together to increase recreational programming before and after school. Both the County and the City allocated general fund dollars to support a collaborative full-service community school model. In 1999, the Multnomah County Youth Advisory Board chose the name "SUN Schools" for Schools Uniting Neighborhoods. During that year, the first eight SUN Schools were selected through a Request for Interest (RFI) process. SUN Lead Agencies, who help to coordinate programs and services at the school site, were then selected jointly with the schools through an initial Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process and Request for Proposal (RFP) that was let only to qualified agencies.

In 2001, Multnomah’s Board of County Commissioners appointed a task force to more formally inventory all county services for school-aged children and families in order to identify overlap, improve coordination, maximize funding, improve data collection and outcomes, and, ultimately, to develop a policy direction. As a result of this multi-year process, the task force created a guiding School Age Policy Framework and folded all services for children and families into one county-wide initiative. This initiative—a cross-sector leadership effort to create a more comprehensive, better aligned service delivery system—built on the County’s existing SUN Community Schools and became known as the SUN Service System in 2004.

SUN has expanded from eight to now 67 community schools in six school districts, including 28 elementary, 15 middle, 17 K-8 and seven high schools. It is the intention of the City and County, as funding becomes available, to ultimately work towards providing these services at all 108 identified high-need schools in Multnomah County. (See Appendix B for a map of SUN sites)

Goals and Approach

SUN Community Schools have three broad goals, and identified who will take the lead on each.

- To ensure educational success for children. Schools take the lead on this priority and the other partners play a supportive role.
- To provide a social and health service support system that will help children and their families be successful in schools and the community. The county, Department of Health Services and non-profits experienced with community-based social services take a lead role on this.
- To provide enrichment and recreational opportunities that connects the curriculum of the school and after-school activities for the students. It will also provide recreational and educational programs for parents and other adults in the neighborhood. By extending the school day and the number of hours a school is open and being used, a school can become a community center. It can then serve as a community-gathering place for any number of services and activities. The City of Portland and Portland Parks & Recreation, the City of Gresham, Gresham parks and Recreation and youth programming agencies will take the lead in enrichment and recreational opportunities.

Another key component is to connect and integrate the activities to increase the chances of success for children. Curriculum alignment, relationships between school and other staff and coordination of programming and building use are essential. Additionally, the involvement of youth, their parents and other in the community in the design, leadership and participation in the programs is key to building a relevant and effective community school. Altogether, SUN creates a comprehensive and supportive school environment, or *conditions for learning* as outlined by the National Coalition for Community Schools (Refer to Appendix A).

To reach these goals, SUN has developed strong collaborative partnerships across systems, in which Todd Diskin, Technical Assistance Coordinator for SUN Community Schools, emphasized “is both an art and science” toward achieving a collective impact.¹⁵ SUN’s definition of collaboration involves a “process in which organizations exchange information, alter activities, share resources, and enhance each other’s capacity for mutual benefit and a common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, and rewards,” and that “in collaboration, there is a commitment to sharing missions, values, strategies, and funding.” Recognizing that school systems alone cannot deal with the myriad of factors that influence student learning, SUN uses the collective impact framework¹⁶ to drive their collaborative process. The elements of collective impact are consistent with what those who are supporting the growth of community schools have been practicing for a long time, and aim to address all parts, rather than one point, of the education continuum. While this framework may be considered the “science,” the “art” is in how it is applied in the local setting and adapted to meet specific needs by efficient use of what is available. The five basic elements include:

- Common agenda or “mission match”
- Continuous communication
- Backbone support organization (intermediary)
- Mutually reinforcing activities
- Shared measurement system

Partners & Organizing Structure

SUN collaborative partners include:

- Multnomah County – Human Services, Health, Library, Justice
- City of Portland – Parks and Recreation, Portland Housing Bureau, and Portland Children’s Levy
- 6 School Districts
- Oregon Department of Human Services
- Businesses
- Non-profit Agencies – 17 contracted and many others in partnership
- Community Members

A variety of benefits are seen by all partners, including coordinated resource allocation resulting in cost efficiencies and reduction of unnecessary duplication, simplified access for participants, broadened outreach to historically underserved communities, programs that are linked across agencies and jurisdictions, better use of neighborhood-based public facilities, and most importantly, improved services and better outcomes for more children and their families. Partners’ demonstrate their commitment to SUN through their contributions, including base funding (operating cash), supplemental funding (match or partner cash), and in-kind (Fig. 1).

Fig 1: 2011-2012 SUN Service System Contributions by Source

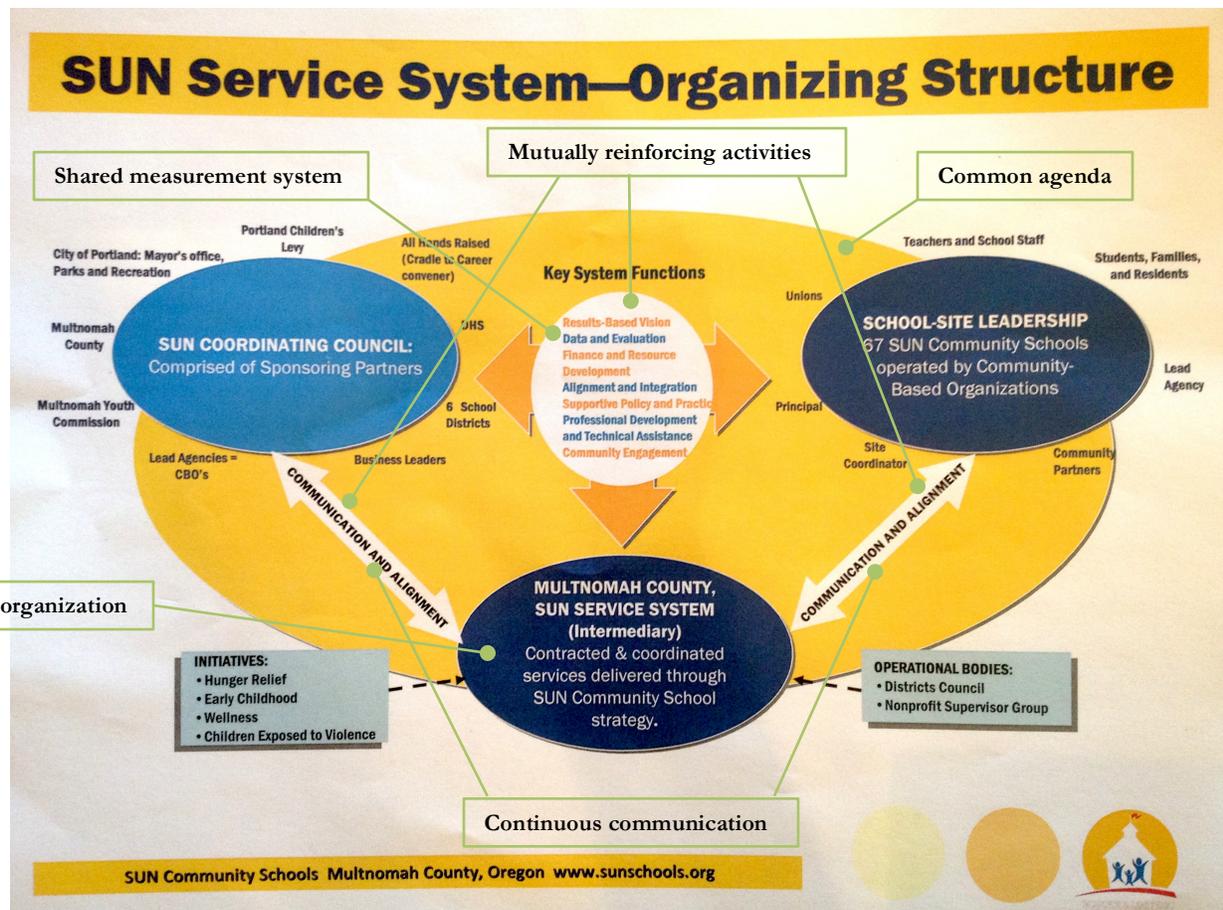
Partner	Operating Cash[1]	% of Total Operating Cash	Match/Partner Cash[2]	In-Kind[3]	Total Contributions
Multnomah County	\$30,152,219	88%			\$30,152,219
City of Portland	\$2,251,760	6.5%	\$9,000		\$2,260,760
Portland Children's Levy	\$833,501	2.5%	\$1,374,588		\$2,208,089
Portland Public Schools	\$240,000	0.7%	\$4,640,000	\$3,917,732	\$8,797,732
Centennial			\$77,049	\$501,732	\$578,781
David Douglas	\$10,000	<0.5%	\$64,910	\$545,463	\$620,373
Gresham-Barlow	\$30,000	<0.5%	\$3,200	\$84,450	\$117,650
Parkrose			\$57,046	\$151,056	\$208,102
Reynolds	\$120,000	<0.5%	\$835,500	\$367,026	\$1,322,526
Nonprofit			\$2,435,968	\$1,449,385	\$3,885,353
21CCLC (Federal grant)	\$670,640	2%	\$903,658		\$1,574,298
Total Contributions	\$34,308,120	100.00%	\$10,400,919	\$7,016,844	\$51,725,883

[1] Operating Cash provides the base funding for the SUN Service System

[2] Match or Partner Cash are contributions that are made/leveraged to supplement base funding. Amounts are estimates.

[3] In-Kind contributions represent those in the form of facilities, goods, commodities, or services instead of cash. Amounts are estimates.

The SUN structure is unique because it is a regional system that coordinates efforts across multiple jurisdictions. To maximize its reach and impact, six regional SUN Service System centers are located in each of the six local school districts. The organizational structure of the SUN Service System shown below (Fig. 2) lays out the key system functions and relationships that align with the basic elements of collective impact.



SUN Community Schools are the school-based service delivery sites for the SUN Service System, a broader cross-sector system of community-based care and support for children and their families. The SUN Coordinating Council comprised of sponsoring partners provide system governance, guidance and support to the SUN Service System. Equity and diversity and inclusivity are core values that drive their work and function as a Council, and are critical guiding principles in all their processes and decision-making to promote health equity.¹⁷

Equity thorough balancing universal accessibility with our commitment to prioritizing service to those who have the highest need; reaching communities in proportion to their poverty level, ethnicity and incident of risk factors.

Diversity and Inclusivity at all levels of the SUN Service System including Council membership and those who are recipients of services within the System. We value the unique needs, strengths and contributions of all members of our community and strive to include all voices in our discussions and decision-making processes.

At the site level, each SUN Community School is jointly managed by the school principal, a site manager and a lead agency (a non-profit or community organization). Schools are also governed by a site partners team, which represents all entities in the school that work with students, and a site advisory body, which includes representatives of the school, youth, families and the community. SUN Community Schools mobilize and strategically organize community resources to provide the following primary activities at the school site:

- Strong core instructional program
- Educational support and skill development for youth and adults
- Enrichment and recreation activities in-school and out-of-school
- Family involvement and support
- Social, health and mental health resources
- Family and community events

Evaluation & Impact on Equity

Annual evaluations are conducted by Multnomah County using school district, teacher and student data collected from databases and surveys demonstrate the consistent effect of SUN. In the 2010-11 school year, regularly participating students showed strong results in academics, attendance and behavioral indicators including¹⁸:

- 74% of students met state benchmarks or growth target in Reading;
- Students' average benchmark gains were equal to or higher than expected in the majority of grades;
- Average daily school attendance was 94.5%;

- 74% of students improved in at least one behavioral or academic area (such as behaving well in class, motivation to learn, or homework completion); and
- 86% of students reported having at least one adult who cares about them and to whom they can go for help.

In addition, 96% of families who receive antipoverty case management, life and job skills services, rent assistance and other basic needs support remained in permanent housing after support ended. The community also reports improvement in other related indicators including parent involvement, community safety and vibrancy.

One key aspect of SUN's success is the degree to which the children, youth and families most affected by disparities (people of color and those living in poverty) are served and included in its efforts. SUN Community Schools consistently serve the most vulnerable kids and families and are structured to ensure that individual student and family needs are identified and met through the coordination of services. In 2010-11, of the 19,127 children and youth served in enrolled services, 80% qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch, 70 percent were children of color and 21% were English Language Learners. These rates compare to the surrounding districts' rates of 54%, 46% and 14% respectively.¹⁹

While programs and services are prioritized for populations with the highest need, available evaluation reports collected demographic data, but did not disaggregate outcomes by race/ethnicity. Other than the 2010-11 report mentioned above, another example is a 2008-2009 study that demonstrated that high school students who participated in SUN Community School activities had better overall attendance and earned more credits than a comparable group of students who did not participate in SUN activities.²⁰ Within study population, the largest ethnic groups represented were 43% African American, 28% White, and 18% Hispanic. Indicators used included high school credits earned during the school year, attendance during the school year, and change in Oregon's Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) Reading and Math scores from 8th to 10th grade; however, outcomes were not disaggregated by race/ethnicity.

Lessons Learned

At the recent Community Schools Fundamentals Conference organized by The Children's Aid Society in New York, Todd Diskin, Technical Assistance Coordinator for SUN Community Schools, related important lessons learned from the SUN experience to other local challenges and strategies in five key areas.

Engage and maintain champions. Include key leaders at the outset to identify mission match and a create sense of ownership. Also, use data to make the case early on and throughout the development process. Another key

strategy to keep leaders engaged leveraging political/social capital and relationships, including inviting them to national conferences and creating press opportunities to make the work visible. Importantly, communicate regularly with champions and give ongoing attention to maintaining champions and transitions in leadership by being proactive about managing change.

Build an infrastructure. Identify an entity to play the role of “managing partner” or “intermediary” and ensure the role is clearly spelled out. Have other staff position(s) dedicated to the initiative and ensure each entity identifies a liaison or key staff person/contact. Develop meeting and communication structure among partners at the outset, but be flexible with room to change and grow.

Communicate! Define communication method(s) and key communicators. Reach out to new champions and expand the champion circle to help make the work visible. “Brand” your community schools effort and employ PR strategies that build a sense of ownership and credit across the partnership. A strong brand helps to build community support and is a useful tool for advocacy efforts.

Drive your work with results. Define a results framework where partners come together around a shared vision and outcomes, identify cross-system measures that drive to outcomes, determine core services and minimum service levels, document, disseminate and discuss results widely. Use the results at all levels including program development and improvement, contract monitoring as well as for promoting success to build champions and advocating for funding. One of the most challenging and important lessons for SUN is partnering to collect and evaluate data. They are in the process to making tools and templates to aid in this process publicly available on their website, including operational agreements and releases of information, etc.

Move the work deeper. This requires constant attention to partnership and a focus on systems improvement and change. Continue to push the fundamental questions that support the work toward shared outcomes: “Is this a mission match?” “Are we moving away from a common agenda?” One of the most critical pieces for institutionalizing the work is to get it in writing – ground the work in policy and maintain and revisit interagency agreements.

Conclusion

A key success factor of SUN Community Schools is that it is not a stand-alone intervention. The strategy emerged from the community’s roots in collaboration, an expansion of existing assets, and an intentional alignment of policies and priorities of public systems. Not to also mention, significant financial and in-kind contributions across all partners that demonstrate investment and commitment to the improving the lives of

children and their families. Beyond an organizational structure to support the work, the coordinated and integrated systems of management and daily operations is what moves the work toward improved outcomes.

Recognizing that SUN Community Schools is a key strategy to achieve health equity and that equity is a core value for prioritizing the work, it can be taken a step further to more closely align community schools with the County's Health Equity Initiative and making it explicit in their process and outcomes. One recommendation, if not considered already, is having a clearly defined Community Schools evaluation framework within the HEI logic model that expresses their understanding, for the purposes of evaluation, of the relationships among the resources available to SUN Community Schools participants, the activities undertaken at the community schools, and expected outcomes and impacts on students, as well as their families, and the schools as institutions. Most importantly, data by race/ethnicity must go beyond target population demographics to outcomes that tie academic performance data to other district, city, or neighborhood-level indicators including health, housing, poverty, etc. to be able to identify where disparities exist and to target and coordinate interventions across systems.

Overall, it is clear that health and education have a shared interest in promoting health, reducing inequalities and sustainable community development. Linking various programs, policies and strategies in a community schools approach helps schools to maximize opportunities for learning and teaching, to reduce disparities among students and communities, and to protect the environments in which we live. Multnomah County's strong collaborative history and innovative strategies including HEI and SUN provide a solid foundation and important lessons to build upon and for others to learn from to deepen collaboration and bring health equity to scale.

Appendix A: Guiding Principles for Community Schools and Conditions for Learning, National Coalition for Community Schools

Guiding Principles for Community Schools

- **Fostering strong partnerships** by sharing resources and expertise and building collaborative, mutually beneficial relationships.
- **Sharing accountability for results** by establishing clear, mutually-agreed upon results to drive the work and helps partners measure progress toward results.
- **Setting high expectations for all** by being organized to support learning. Children, youth and adults are expected to learn at high standards and to be contributing members of their community.
- **Building on the community's strengths** by marshaling the assets of the entire community including the people who live and work there, local organizations, city agencies and the school.
- **Embracing diversity** by knowing their community – working to develop respect and a strong, positive identity for people of diverse backgrounds and are committed to the welfare and social justice of the whole community.

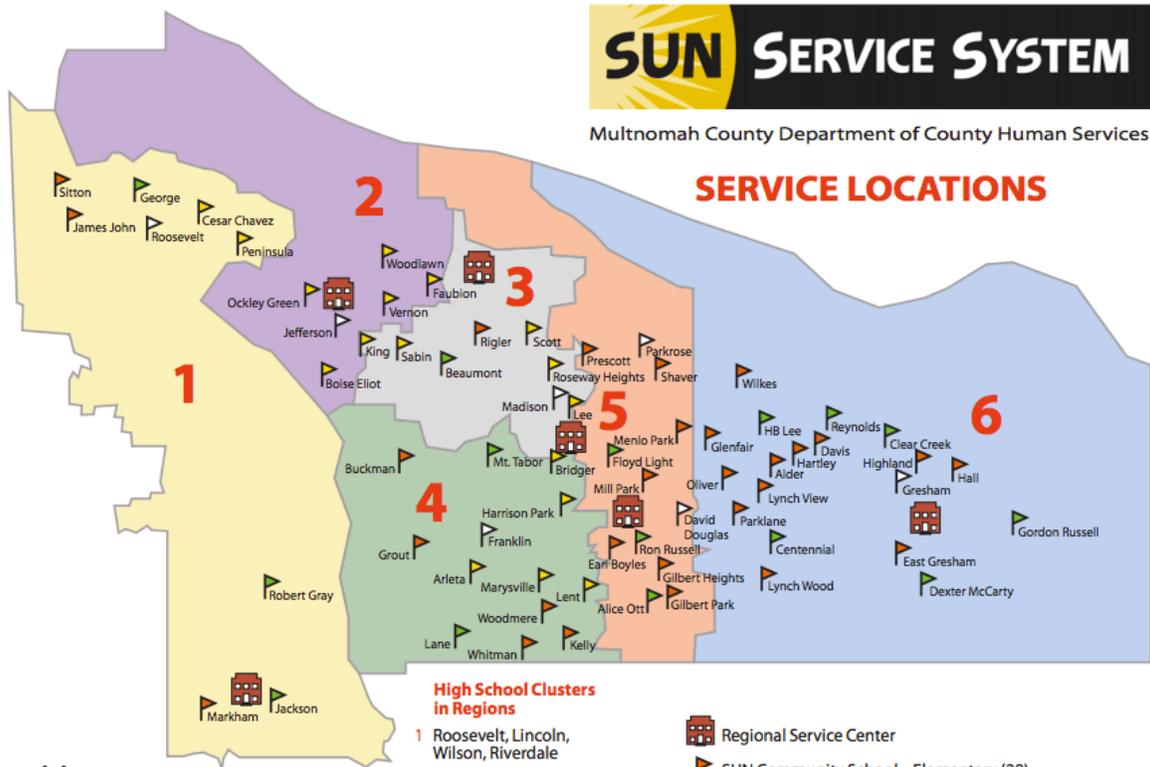
Conditions for Learning

- Early childhood development programs are available to nurture growth and development.
- The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.
- Students are motivated and engaged in learning—both in school and in community settings, during and after school.
- The basic physical, social, emotional, and economic needs of young people and their families are met.
- There is mutual respect and collaboration among families and school staff.
- The community is engaged in the school and promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful that connects students to a broader learning community.

Appendix B: SUN Service System Service Locations



Multnomah County Department of County Human Services



SERVICE LOCATIONS

High School Clusters in Regions

- 1 Roosevelt, Lincoln, Wilson, Riverdale
- 2 Jefferson
- 3 Grant, Madison
- 4 Cleveland, Franklin
- 5 Parkrose, David Douglas
- 6 Reynolds, Centennial Gresham, Barlow, Corbett

- Regional Service Center
- SUN Community School – Elementary (28)
- SUN Community School – Middle (15)
- SUN Community School – K-8 (17)
- SUN Community School – High (7)



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