

ISBA Student Photography Contest

What Does it Mean to be an American?

p. 26

SLATE Cover Photo:

Overall Winner - Carolina Alvarez
Murtaugh School District



Scaling Community Schools Across Idaho



Photos courtesy of ICCS.

Listen closely to Idaho's community schools and you'll hear a common throughline: learning is rooted in strong, connected communities.

Educators, families, and community partners are applying this insight through community school strategy by aligning local assets to meet student and family needs in 65 public schools in Idaho. Districts in every educational region adopted this strategy because remarkable things happen when educators, families, and community partners align around student success.

Community schools are seeing declines in chronic absenteeism, improvements in school climate and student belonging, and graduation rates are trending upward. These outcomes underscore the power of community care to catalyze student success.

How Community Schools Took Root in Idaho

Idaho's community school strategy began in 2016, when United Way of Treasure Valley and partners adopted a collective impact approach to address challenges facing students and families that no single system could solve alone. Student success is shaped by the intersection of education, youth opportunity, financial security, and community health.

Community school strategy offered a promising path forward, bringing educators, nonprofits, funders, and community leaders together as the Idaho Coalition for Community Schools (ICCS). The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health stepped forward as a cornerstone partner in 2021, recognizing community schools as a powerful upstream investment in student health, well-being, and long-term community resilience.

ICCS aligns statewide partners, provides professional learning, expands access to programs and services supporting student opportunity and well-being. It supports community school coordinator roles and the implementation of the strategy within schools. Community school coordinators provide capacity to align existing resources and partnerships to support areas such as academic enrichment, student and family engagement, and physical and behavioral health, enabling educators to deliver education more effectively and sustainably.

Federal Recognition and Statewide Scaling

ICCS and United Way of Treasure Valley — the backbone of ICCS — were awarded a Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) State Scaling Grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2023. This investment recognized what educators and families were already experiencing: community schools work for Idaho kids.

ICCS and 22 school districts used this funding to expand community school strategy into 47 rural schools, supporting community school coordinator positions, strengthening local partnerships, and building statewide infrastructure for long-term sustainability. More than 25,000 PK-12 students across all educational regions are attending a community school this year.

What Makes a Community School a Community School?

Community schools are neighborhood public schools implementing a time-tested strategy that is locally led and responsive to each unique community.

ICCS summarizes the strategy this way: If you've seen one community school, you've seen one community school. The strategy is grounded in the shared aspirations of each community, driven by student and family voices who make every school special and distinct.

The community school journey begins with assets and needs assessments. Leadership teams — principals, coordinators, teachers, families, students, and community members — collect and analyze multiple forms of data to develop a clear picture of the community.

Each school identifies priorities that drive partnership development, resource alignment, and decision-making to ensure support is tailored to local barriers and aspirations.

Shared Priorities and Promising Practices

Clear trends in priority areas have emerged, including attendance; behavioral and physical health; family engagement; academic enrichment and out-of-school-time learning; early literacy and kindergarten readiness; school transitions; college and career pathways; positive school climate; and connecting families to essential resources.

It's working. Schools reported stronger community partnerships, improved building culture and attendance, and reduced barriers to learning. Community schools expanded enrichment opportunities, strengthened students' sense of belonging, and increased access to physical and behavioral health supports — building networks that help schools respond more effectively to student and family needs.

Community School Spotlight: Caldwell School District

Four elementary community schools in Caldwell identified a priority: improving student attendance.

One school laid the foundation for procedures to address chronic absence, which is defined as a student missing 10% or more of the school year. The school included regular progress check-ins using year-to-date comparisons. The percentage of students trending toward chronic absence declined from 28% to 16%.

Community school coordinators strengthened relationships through out-of-school enrichment programs and home visits, helping students feel more connected to school.

"I have made a point of inviting kids who are disconnected to school to our after-school programs ... over time those kids become more engaged. You see these lights turning on, like, this is a place where I belong," a community school leader said.

Caldwell is collaborating with local healthcare providers to address health-related drivers of chronic absence. A medical resident at Full Circle Health built procedures to include school attendance conversations in pediatric visits — systemic changes that can yield long-term results.



After school robotics at Lewis and Clark Elementary in Caldwell, ID

Community School Spotlight: Moscow School District

Moscow School District prioritized school climate, belonging, and upstream prevention in its first year of FSCS implementation.

Partnerships expanded access to enrichment in arts, STEM, and leadership; career pathways such as CNA certification; coordinated medical and vision care; expanded in-school counseling; and a comprehensive resource hub offering clothing, toiletries, school supplies, and books, in a dignified setting.

Student surveys after implementation revealed strong outcomes. Between 96-98% of students reported a sense of belonging, access to a trusted adult, and strong peer relationships. Discipline referrals declined, school culture improved, and ISAT scores increased.

A community school leader reflected: "I walked into chemistry night and literally had to stop for a second," one school leader said "It was so full of family."

Navigating Uncertainty, Together

Many federal education initiatives, including FSCS funding, faced uncertainty. When funding for Idaho community schools was threatened, statewide leadership and community partners mobilized quickly and collectively, with the Idaho School Boards Association (ISBA) playing a huge role in activating local leaders and elevating school board voices across the state.

With strong support from the Idaho Department of Education and Superintendent Debbie Critchfield, funding was restored, reinforcing recognition that community schools strengthen schools, families, and communities. ISBA's engagement helped ensure district and board leaders were informed, aligned, and vocal, and thousands of Idaho voices were raised in support. The response demonstrated that community schools in Idaho are not a fleeting initiative. They are a shared commitment and here to stay.

Community Schools Forward

Organizations, districts, and schools that comprise ICCS are charting sustainable paths forward through braided funding, cross-sector partnerships, philanthropic investment, and collective accountability for student success.

Community schools are rebuilding capacity across Idaho's education system by bringing the abundance of community care that already exists directly into schools. They are redefining what is possible when schools and communities lead together. The work continues, and the future is bright.



Moscow School District

