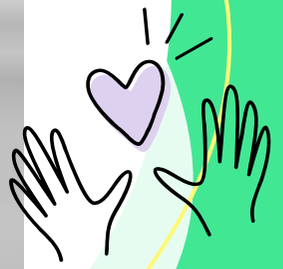

The Community Schools Approach:

Why, What, and How to Boost ABCs

@characterstrong

The Community Schools Approach

Dr. Alisha Hill

Exec. Director of Professional Services CharacterStrong

Lisa Rochford

Capacity Builder & Transformative Space Curator

Sarah Mathew

Director of National Partnerships CharacterStrong

Objectives

Define community schools

Explore 4 key pillars

Connect CharacterStrong SEL to pillars

Discuss system-level infrastructure

Share practical strategies & resources

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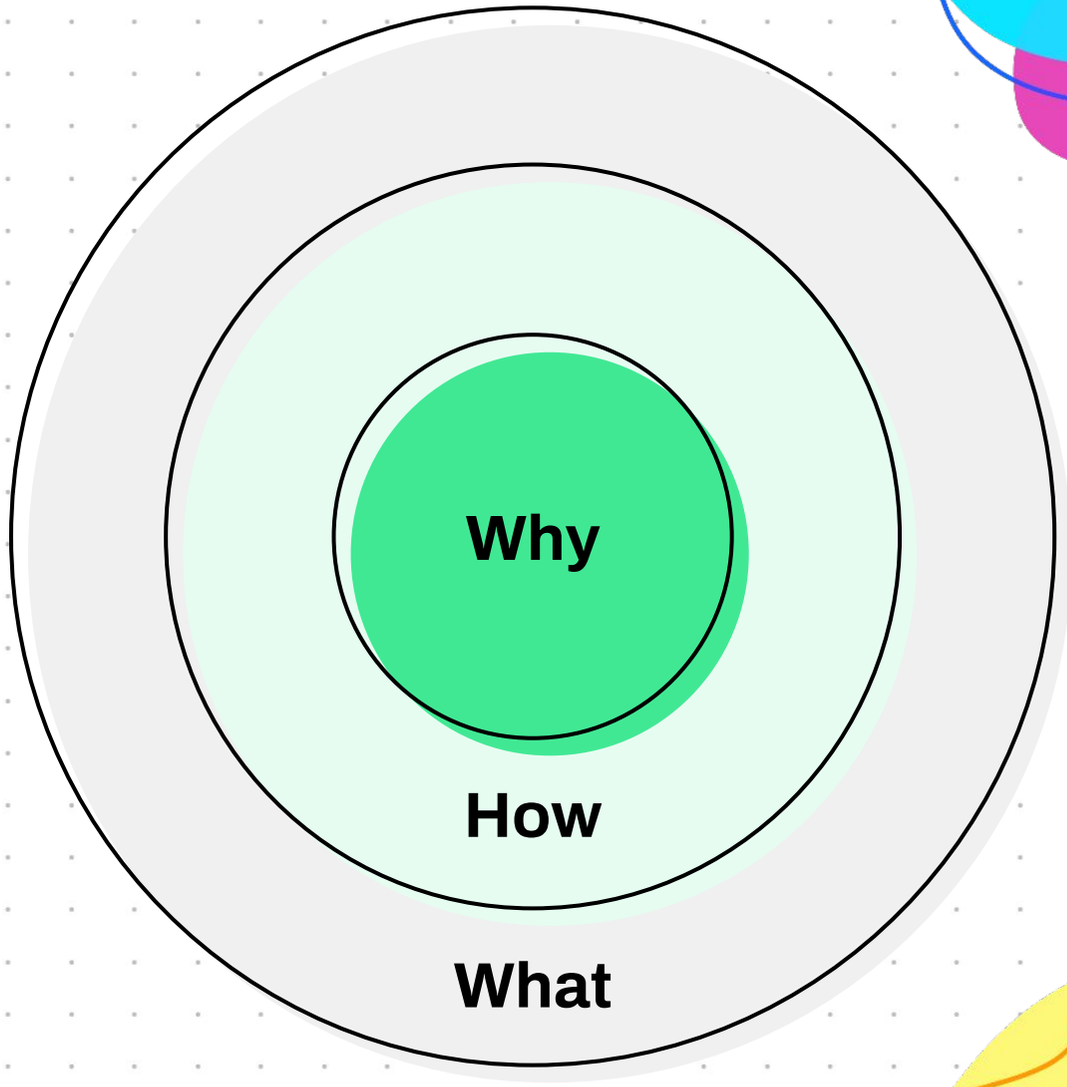
Why Community School

What are Community Schools

How to utilize the 4 Pillars of Community Schools



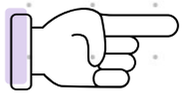
Turn & Talk:

What ONE word comes to mind when you hear Community School?

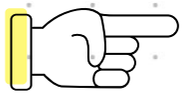
Why

Community Schools

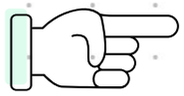
Why Community Schools? Why Now?



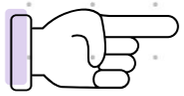
1 **in 5 students** faces unmet mental health needs



Educators report **high levels** of burnout and isolation

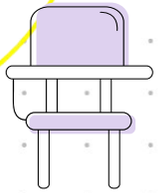


Fragmented services = inconsistent support



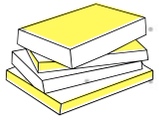
Families want to feel like t**rue partners**

Why Community Schools Work



Improved Attendance:
Chronic absenteeism **dropped from 45% to 32%** after supports like transportation and health access were added.

Higher Graduation Rates:
Some community schools report on-time **graduation rates over 90%.**



Better Academic Performance:
Extended learning, mentoring, and tutoring **boost outcomes in math and reading.**

Stronger Community Engagement:
Families, educators, and partners feel a stronger **sense of belonging and shared purpose.**

Why Community Schools

- Improved Attendance
- Higher Graduation Rates
- Better Academic Performance
- Stronger Community Engagement
- Stronger school climate

Turn & Talk:
Which of these outcomes would make the biggest difference in your setting?

Why Community Schools?

Community Schools address root causes, not just symptoms.

What

are Community Schools?

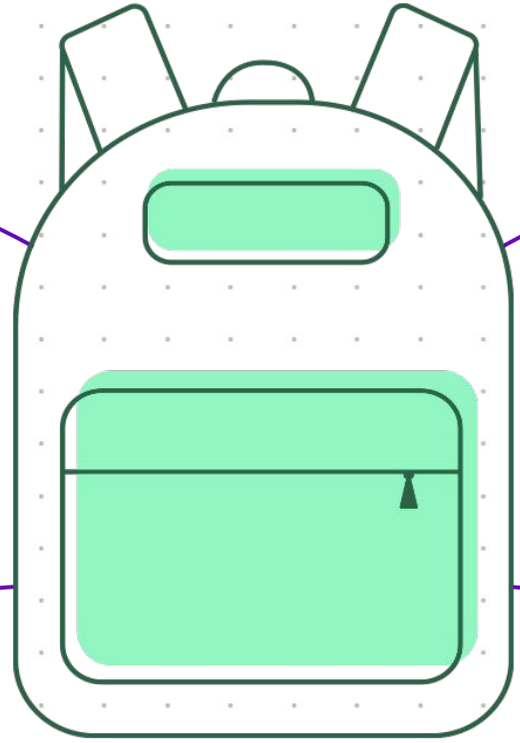
Community Schools

A community school is any school serving pre-Kindergarten through high school students using a **“whole-child”** approach, with the school as a “**hub of opportunity and access”** for students, families, and the surrounding community. It integrates academics, health and social services, after school and summer programming, and family engagement under one roof.

Whole Child

Academic Needs
(Core skills, Content Knowledge, Career/College Readiness)

Social-Emotional Needs
(Competencies, Belonging, Mental Health)



Basic Needs
(Nutrition, Sleep, Physical Health)

Behavioral Needs
(Attendance, Expectations, Engagement)

Character Strong

Community Schools

School & Community Partnership

Public **schools** that partner closely with **families** and **community** organizations **to serve the whole child**.

Community Schools

Hub of Opportunity

Community Schools provide not just education, but a broad range of academic and life supports and resources—removing barriers that often block student success.

Community Schools

Access for All Students

Through integrated student supports, enriched learning time, active family engagement, and collaborative leadership, community schools connect students and families to the tools they need to thrive.

Implementation is the Missing Link

Understanding the Pillars

≠

Implementing Them

Community Schools

4 Pillars

Collaborative Leadership

School leaders, community leaders, and families collaborate as a team with shared decision-making

Integrated Supports

Mental, physical health, and social services integrated with academics to support student success.

Expanded Learning Time

After-school, weekend, and summer programs provide academic and social, emotional, and behavioral support.

Active Family & Community Engagement

Strong partnerships between families, schools, and community organizations to build trust.

Community Schools: 4 Pillars

Which of these is strongest at your school?

1

Collaborative Leadership

Bringing all stakeholders to the table and actively involved?

2

Integrated Supports

Bridging the gap between school and community resources and making it easily accessible?

3

Expanded Learning Time

Removing logistical barriers like transportation and scheduling issues?

4

Active Family & Community Engagement

Building strong consistent partnerships that provide resources for wraparound support?

Community Schools: 4 Pillars

Which needs the most support at your school?

1

Collaborative Leadership

Bringing all stakeholders to the table and actively involved?

2

Integrated Supports

Bridging the gap between school and community resources and making it easily accessible?

3

Expanded Learning TIme

Removing logistical barriers like transportation and scheduling issues?

4

Active Family & Community Engagement

Building strong consistent partnerships that provide resources for wraparound support?

How

the Community Schools Pillars Work?

Lisa N. Rochford

Capacity Builder

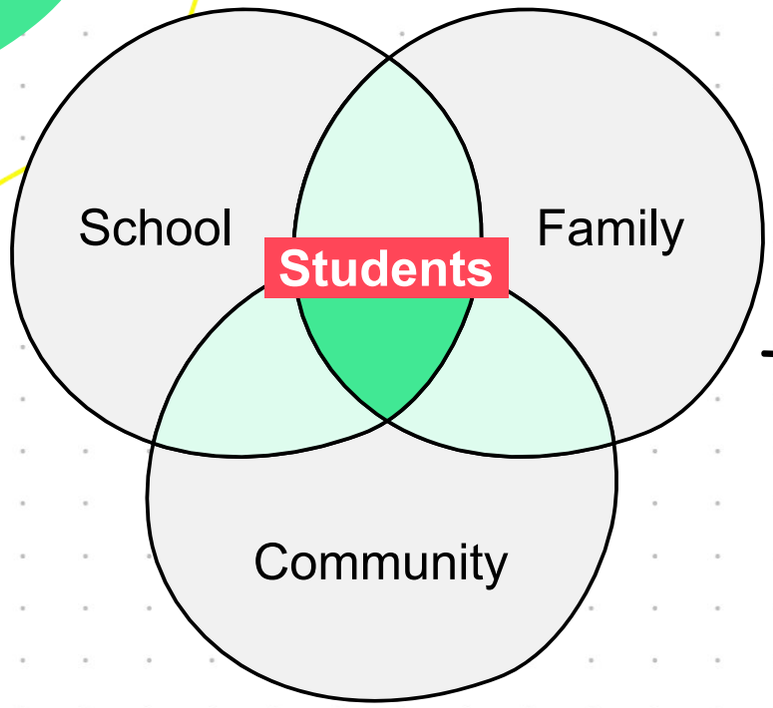
New York City Public Schools

- # of students
- # of campuses
- Focus
- Partnership with CharacterStrong

NYC Community Schools Approach

How

Collaborative Leadership

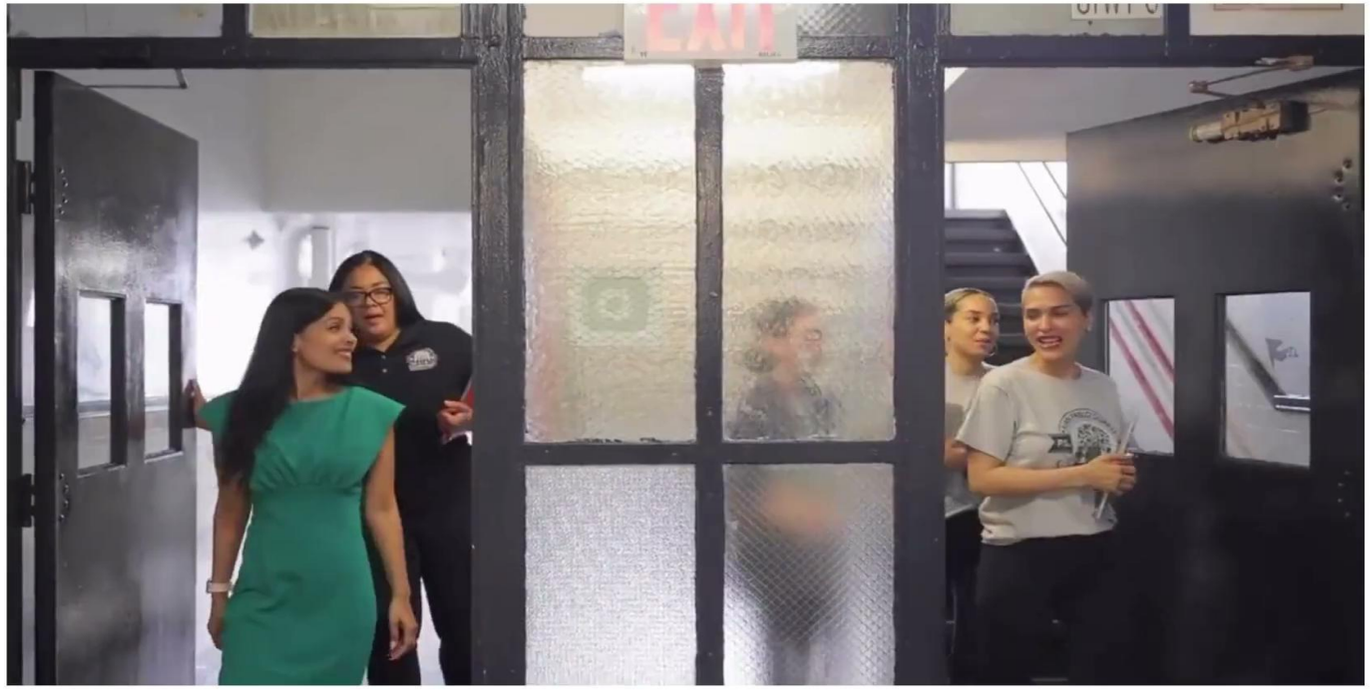


Shared Ownership Drives Change

Collaborative School Leadership

School leaders, community leaders, and families collaborate as a team with shared decision-making.

NYC Community Schools Approach



Shared Ownership Drives Change

“If they’re **impacted,**

they should be **involved.**”

Pillar To Practice

Pillar 1: Collaborative Leadership and Practices

- ➜ Share decision-making with staff, students, families, and partners
- ➜ Create cross-role leadership teams and shared planning structures
- ➜ Use protocols that surface diverse perspectives and shared goals
- ➜ Dedicate time for regular reflection and co-learning
- ➜ Build systems of accountability *with*, not just *for*, stakeholders

What leadership practices can best support your community school success?

Turn & Talk:

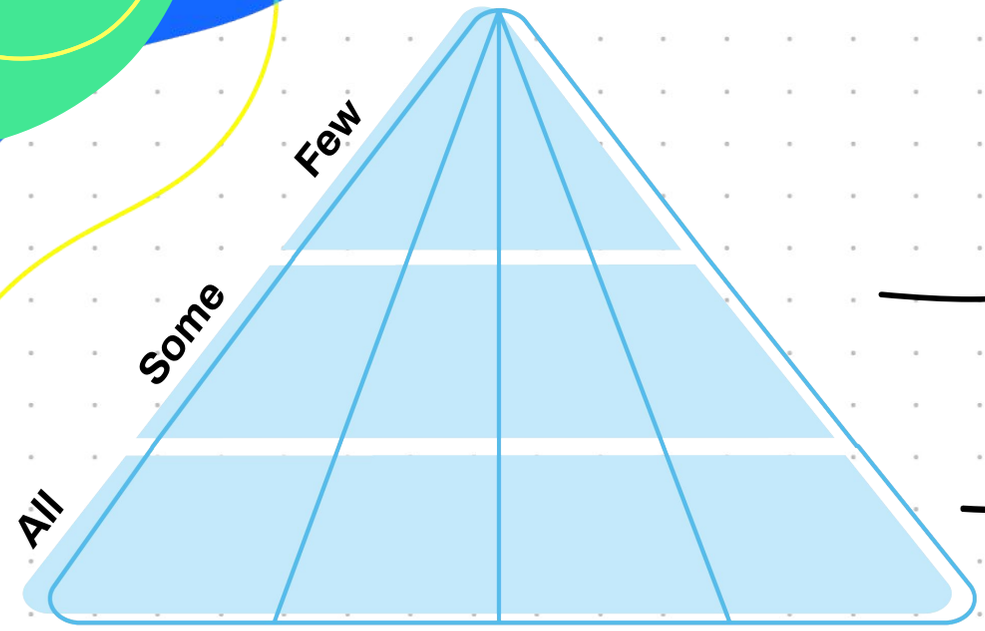
Who is at the table when your school makes decisions?

Turn & Talk:

What leadership practices can best support your community school success?

How

Integrated Supports



Integrated Supports

Mental, physical health, and social services integrated with academics to support student success.

Foundational Support to Meet Basic Needs

Medical/Physical Health, Housing, Food Security

From Data to Daily Support

NYC Community Schools Approach

Make Supports Proactive

Proactive > Reactive

Pillar To Practice

Pillar 2: Integrated Student Supports

- ➜ Identify and address students' academic, health, and social-emotional needs
- ➜ Use data to proactively offer supports — not just respond to crises
- ➜ Coordinate with health clinics, food banks, counselors, and community organizations
- ➜ Create a school-based care team that meets regularly
- ➜ Make student support visible and accessible (referral forms, posters, QR codes)

Turn & Talk:

List one student support your school currently offers. Is it proactive or reactive?

Turn & Talk:

What integrated practices can best support your students?

How

Expanded Learning Time

Expanded Learning Time

After-school, weekend, and summer programs provide academic and social, emotional, and behavioral support.

NYC Community Schools Approach

Make Supports Proactive

Learning doesn’t stop **at 3 PM.**

Step 3:

Connect to Relationships and Belonging

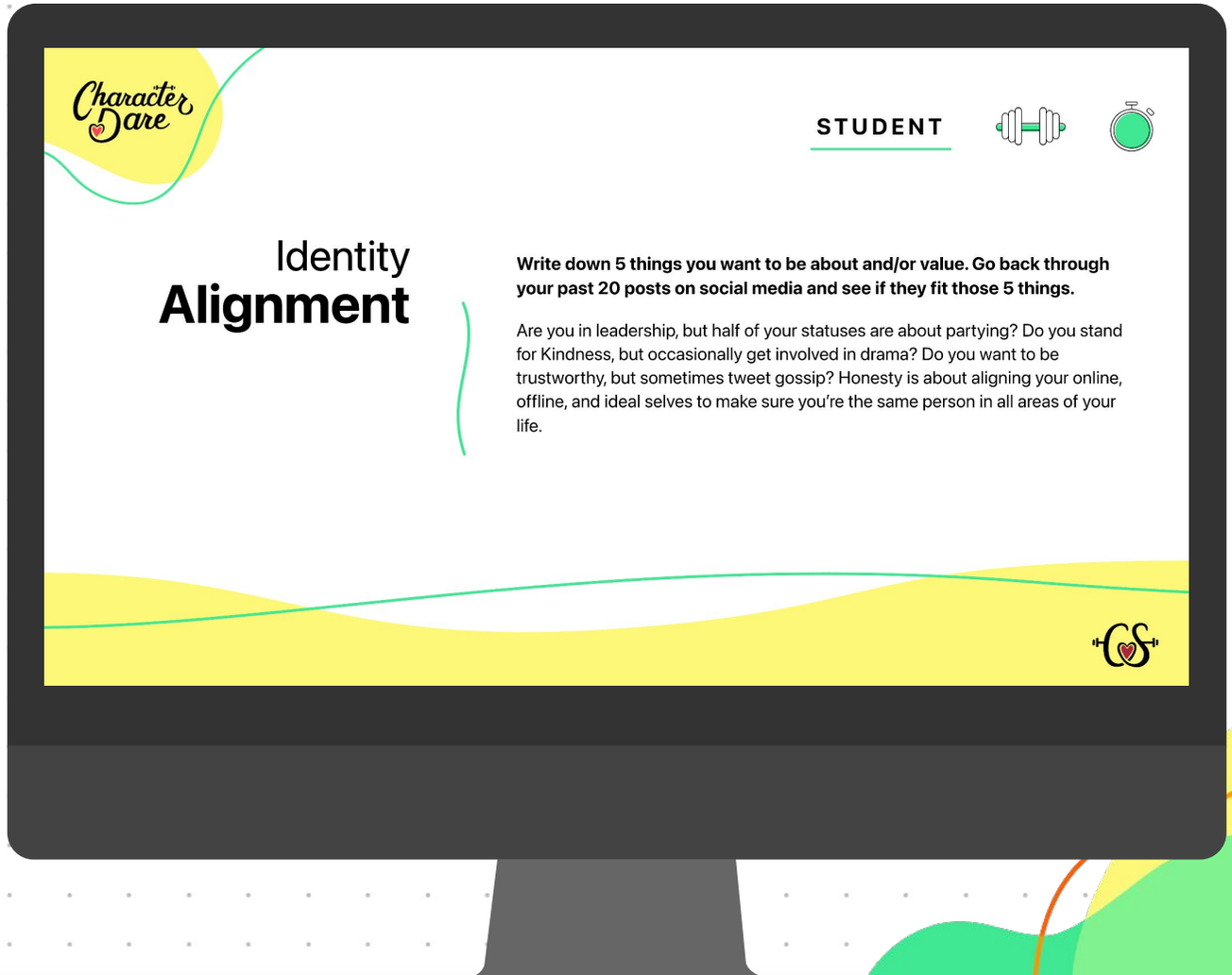
Examples

- Sessions starting with connection questions
- CharacterDares used in sports or clubs
- Integrated Social, Emotional and Behavior Lessons

Effective School Leadership is needed to create a positive culture and climate for the adults to get to outcomes for students.

Schoolwide Resources includes:

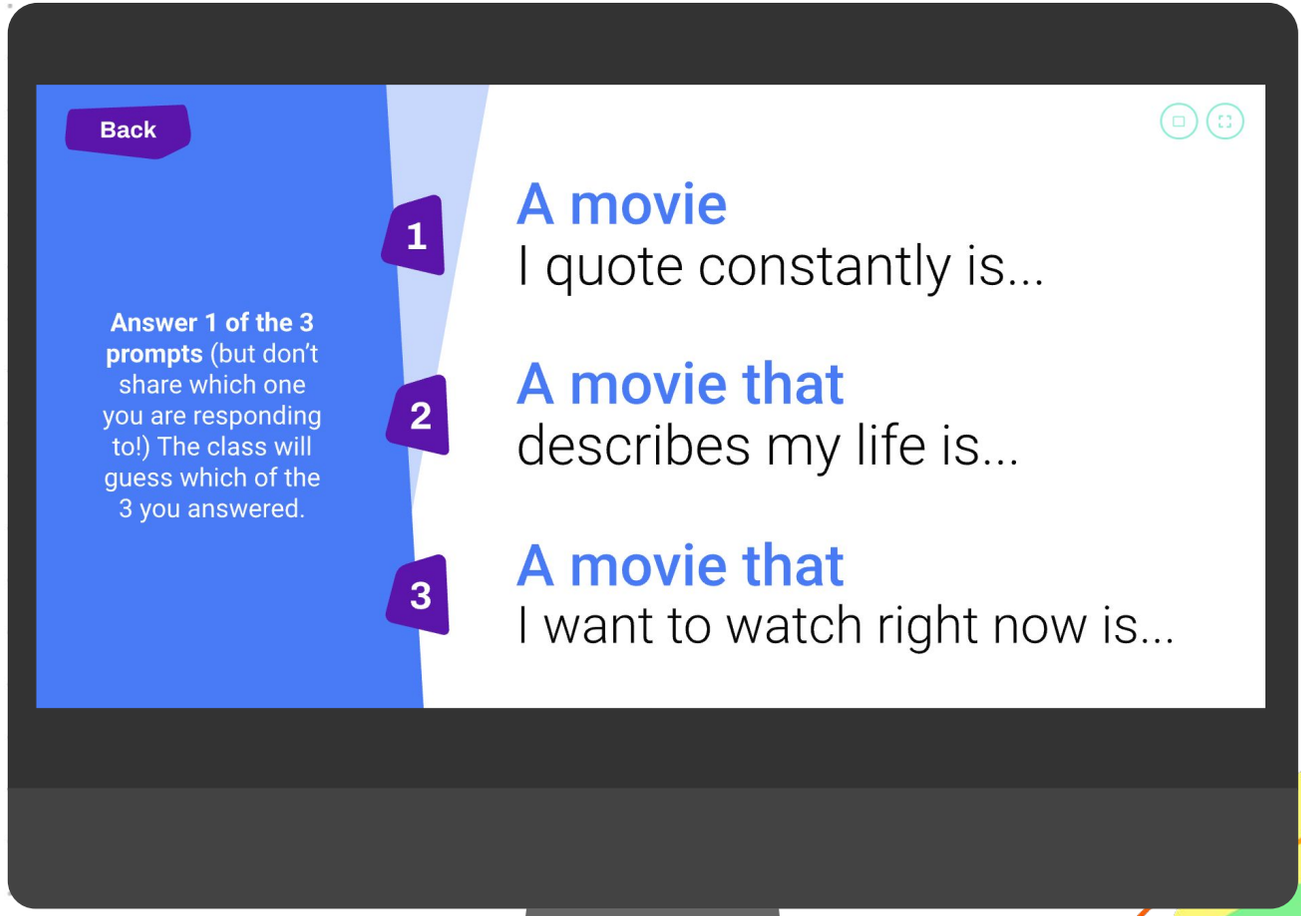
- Staff Pursuits
- Staff Dares
- Student Dares
- Family Dares



Educators need to be equipped with low-burden, high impact practices they feel confident and competent to implement.

Multi-tiered curricula that includes:

- LoHi Toolkit
- Relational Strategies
- Community Building Games



Pillar To Practice

Pillar 3: Expanded & Enriched Learning Time

- ➜ Extend learning beyond the bell — after school, weekends, and summer
- ➜ Offer arts, STEM, physical activity, and culturally relevant programming
- ➜ Partner with community orgs to provide unique learning experiences
- ➜ Use enrichment time to build identity, confident, and curiosity
- ➜ Ensure equity of access (free transportation, meals, language access)

Turn & Talk:

Where could social-emotional or relational practices show up outside of the school day?

Turn & Talk:

What enrichment activities have you seen impact student engagement?

How

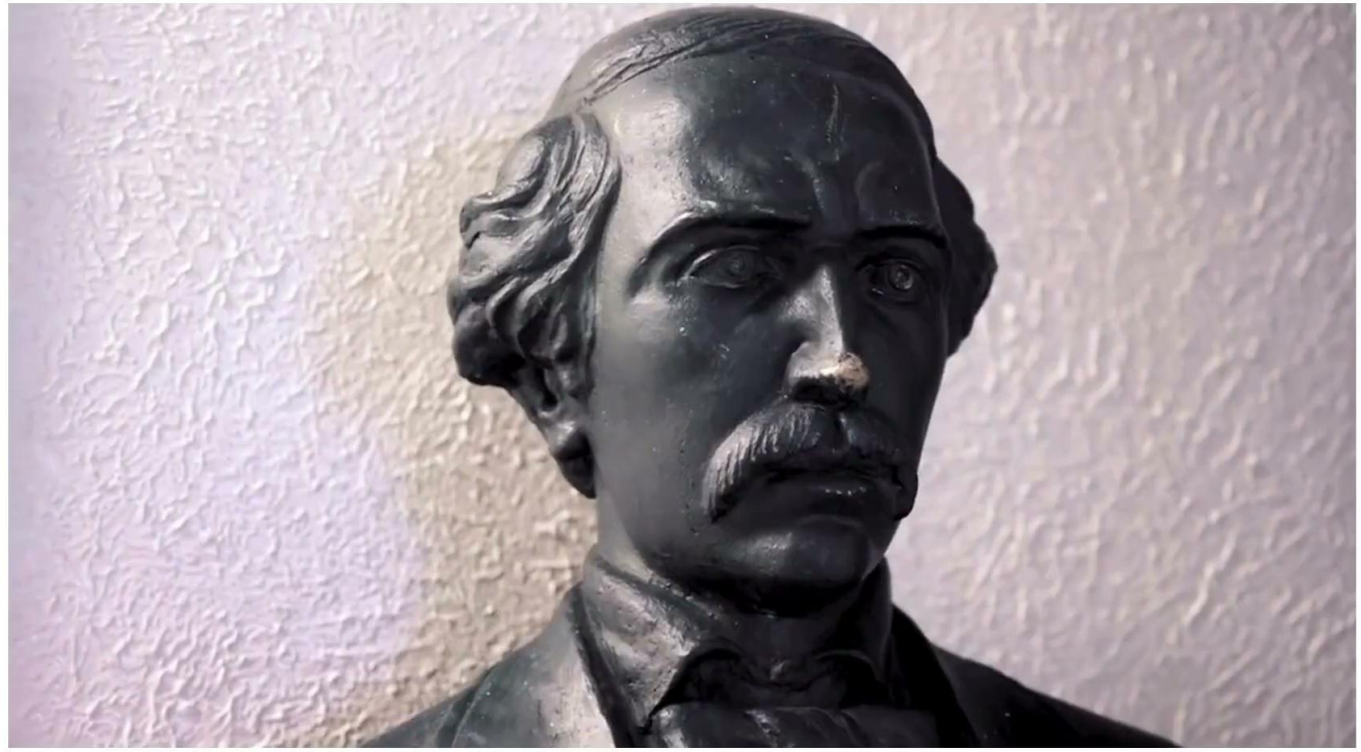
Active Engagement

Family & Community Engagement

Strong partnerships between families, schools, and community organizations to build trust.

Family as Partner, Not Audience

NYC Community Schools Approach



Make It Two-Way

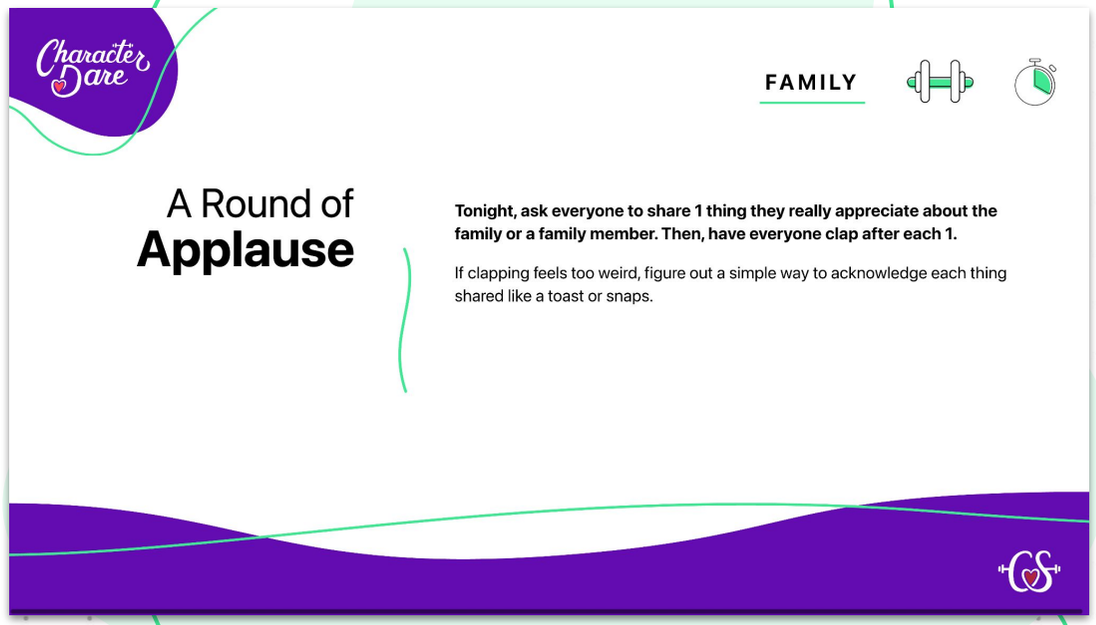
Trust is built when we listen,
not just inform.

Step 4:

Open Spaces for Two-Way Communication

Examples:

- FamilyDares
- Family interviews/listening sessions
- Community walks



CharacterStrong provides resources or family to **reinforce life & learning skill-building** for **ALL students at all levels.**

Family Communication Made Easy

www.characterstrong.com/familystrong

Keep families connected with simple, flexible tools:

- **Start of Year**: Send the *Family Introduction Letter*.
- **After Session 5**: Share the *Character Challenge Letter* and watch this video for tips.
- **Ongoing**: Use 6 easy-to-edit templates to share weekly lesson updates.

Pillar To Practice

Pillar 4: Active Family & Community Engagement

- Invite families as co-creators, not just event attendees
- Use multiple communication methods (texts, WhatsApp, in-person chats)
- Host culturally affirming events co-led by families and students
- Center family voice in decision-making groups and feedback loops
- Build trust through consistent, two-way communication and outreach

Turn & Talk:

Was your last family communication one-way or two-way?

Turn & Talk:

What are creative ways your school/community can engaged families?

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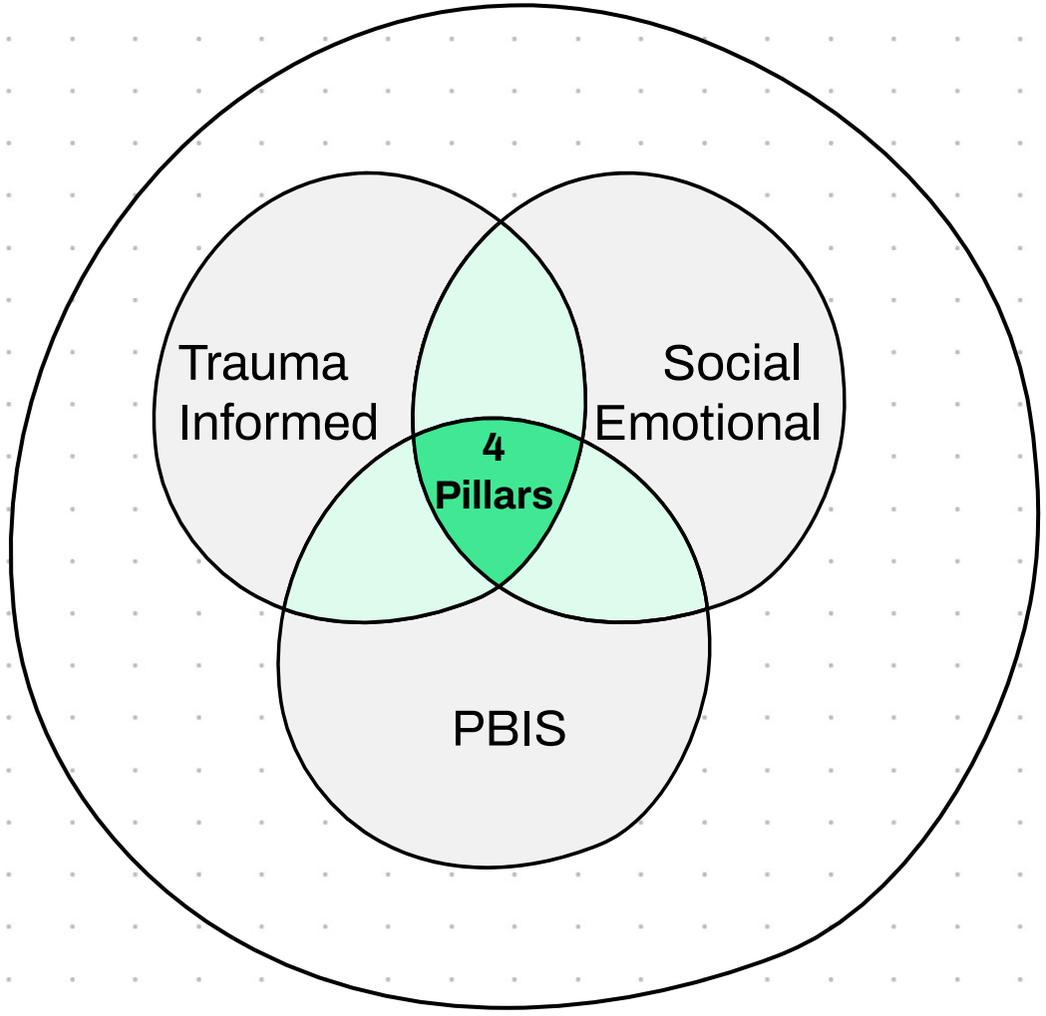
Tools and Next Steps

Align Pillars With Systems

Pillars succeed when they’re embedded in what already exists.



All Pillars in Action

It’s a System—Not a Set of Programs

➜ The **four pillars** *work best together*

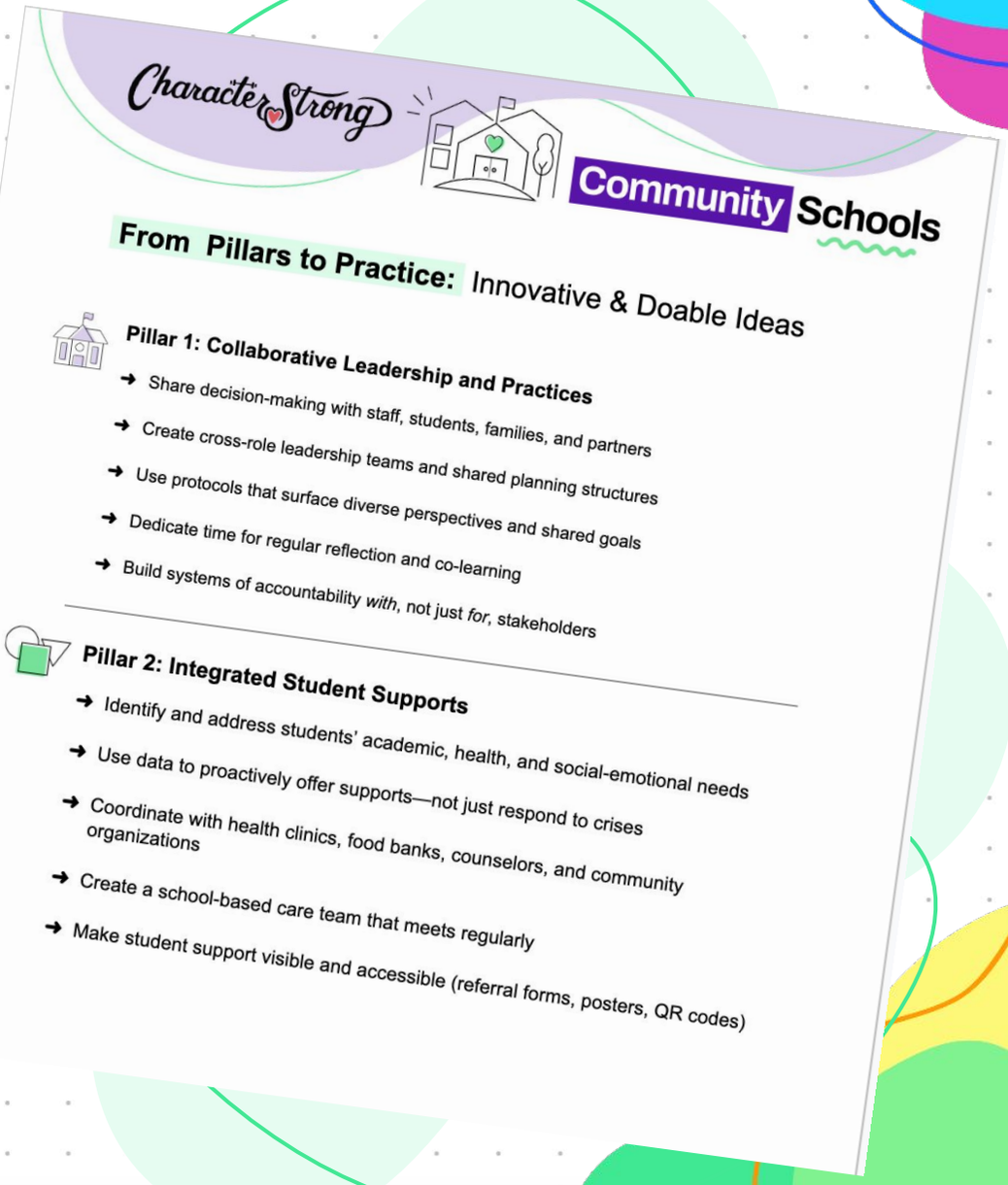
➜ When aligned, they create a web of support that strengthens:

- Student achievement
- Family trust
- Community well-being

From Pillars to Practice: Innovative & Doable Ideas

Pillar 1: What leadership practices can best support your community school success?

Pillar 2: What supports does your community school currently offer or need?



From Pillars to Practice: Innovative & Doable Ideas

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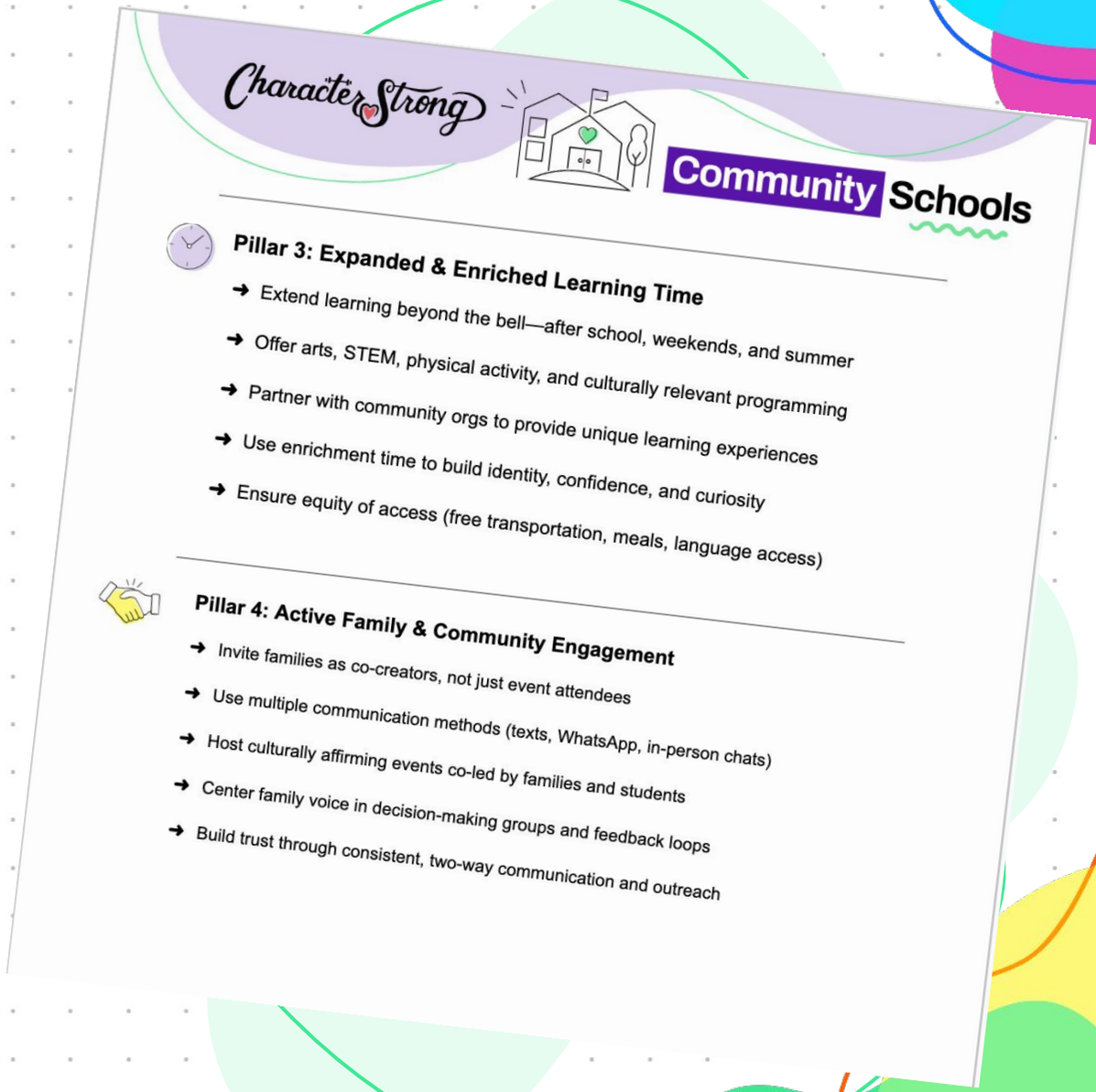
Pillar 4: What are creative ways your school/community can engaged families?



Pillar-by-Pillar Takeaways

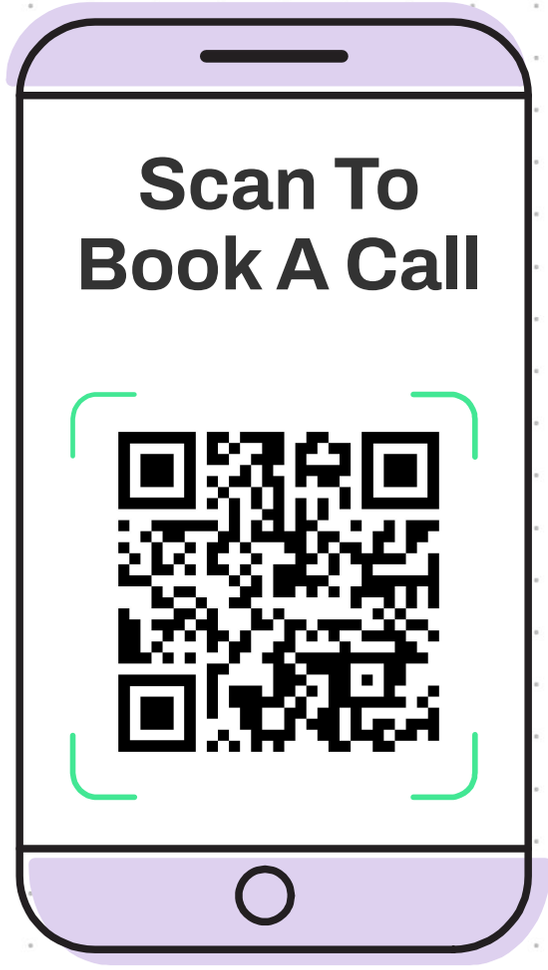
What to Remember

- ➜ Integrated Supports → Don’t wait for crisis
- ➜ Collaborative Leadership → Empower shared ownership
- ➜ Expanded Learning Time → Embed SEL beyond the school day
- ➜ Family Engagement → Build trust through shared experience

BRIGHTER TOMORROW

What's one practice you'll try this upcoming school year?

Connect on Community Schools



Any other information that might be helpful before the call?

Community Schools

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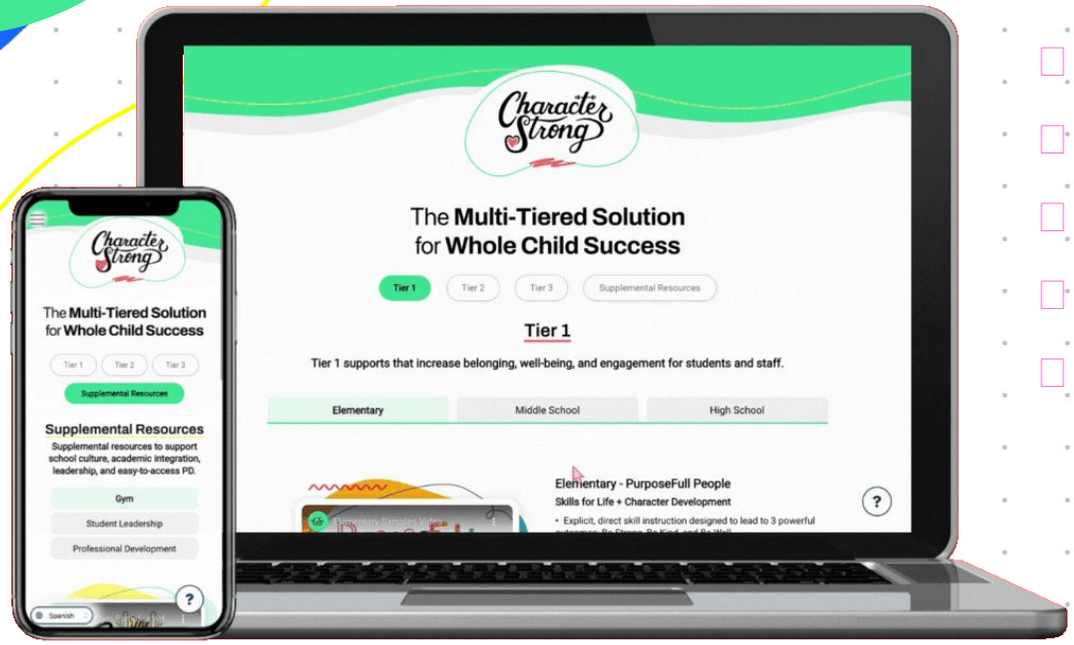
60 Second Feedback

Tier 1 Curriculum



- PreK - 12th Grade Vertically Aligned Curriculum
- Designed by Educators for Educators
- Every lesson is unique and does not repeat
- Research-Based Lessons
- Plug and Play Resources

Scan to Learn More

The CS Weekly

- A quick 2-3 minute strategy
- Delivered every Monday

THE Character Strong WEEKLY

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CERTIFICATION

September 2025: Louisville, KY
October 2025: Seattle, WA
October 2025: New York City
November 2025: Austin, TX

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CharacterStrong.com/MTSS-Certification

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