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A Blueprint for the Charles City Public School's "Community Den"

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Forward

Positionality Statement

As a team of professionals temporarily working with this unique rural school district, we acknowledge the potential to be seen by Community Den patrons and the CCPS team as outsiders. While each of us is committed in our personal and professional lives to ongoing advocacy and support for marginalized and underserved communities, we ran the risk of being perceived as though we were doing the work for our own purposes and likely to disconnect from our engagement as soon as this project concluded. As such, we were aware of the potential for our efforts to be seen as, or even cross a line and become, toxic charity (Lupton, 2011). It was our intention to commit to this project and the relationships we build with the CCPS employees and Community Den in a genuine and open manner, employing Lupton's Oath for Compassionate Service, with a commitment to empowering others, listening, and doing no harm.

Our focus was on how best to connect with and tap into the close community that exists in Charles City, which we saw as a key partner throughout this process. We immediately recognized what a labor of love this initiative was for the district and how their Request for Assistance came from a desire to become empowered and self-sustaining. In turn, we aimed to develop and maintain strong relationships with their community so that they recognize while we were engaged in this work as a requirement of our doctoral program, we were also committed on a personal level. We entered our interactions with the full intention of relying on their passion and culture of care while bringing with us our own expertise, efforts, and desire to make positive and lasting change. Additionally, as we entered their community and this space, we relied on and acknowledged our own lived experiences, which had the potential to inform or hinder our understanding of the needs of this truly unique community.

Lisa Cooper

Lisa Cooper grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and is a proud graduate of the Detroit Public Schools Systems (DPS). She is a first-generation college student and sees life through her lived experience as being a Black, African American, Heterosexual, Christian female. These identities have shaped how she views and navigates the world. Equally important, Lisa grew up in a low-income, single-parent home in an urban environment. She was raised by a community of people who instilled the importance of community activism, making a difference in the lives of others within the community priority. Thus, she has continued to participate in civic engagement activities that contribute to developing the knowledge, skills, and resources of minoritized groups.

Currently, Lisa is a collaborative mid-manger with more than 13+ years of higher education student-affairs experience and the ability to integrate co-curricular learning into the student involvement experience. Specifically, the majority of her daily work centers around working with students from underrepresented groups to gain access to the resources they need to compete for economic advancement-through High Impact Practices. HIPs are effective educational practices that promote active student engagement, deep integrative learning that ultimately leads to a student's persistence, satisfaction & ultimately graduation. Specifically, Lisa works with young adults on academic and personal counseling, working with diverse populations, multiculturalism training, conflict mediation, workshop facilitation, evaluating, organizing, and coordinating groups. Lisa feels these skill sets are the types of experiences students should engage in to help them to develop the skills they might need to contribute to a highly skilled 21st-century workforce that advances the human condition.

Ian Kunkes

Ian Kunkes is white, Jewish, able-bodied, upper-middle class, cis-gendered male. He grew up in an affluent New Jersey suburb and with the exception of a brief time living and working in a rural community in Maryland, has primarily engaged with urban communities. As such, his lived experience has been in stark contrast to most of the Charles City residents. He has worked in the field of education for 15 years in a range of settings from institutes of higher education to public K-12 schools and is currently a student affairs and disability services administrator at an urban university. As a member of this Capstone Team, Ian brings extensive program development and management expertise, specifically in the context of supporting underrepresented student populations. He approaches this work with the goal of promoting student access and inclusion in their educational pursuits. His professional mission is informed by a commitment to identifying barriers that impede student development and implementing practical and high-impact solutions that foster success.

Adrienne Quarles-Smith

Adrienne Quarles-Smith within the capstone team represents a Black/African-American, Catholic, divorced, single mother with a physical disability. Adrienne stands on the shoulders of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, as she was raised within a single-parent household. This beautiful trifecta of women shaped her core beliefs and values of extending grace, independence, perseverance, respect for hard work, and advocacy. Adrienne is a proud graduate of Richmond Public Schools, first-generation college graduate, and Virginia Commonwealth University Alumni.

Adrienne's life and work experiences have led her to committing herself to educate children and their families within Richmond and the tri-cities communities. Her first 10 years of teaching was in the heart of Richmond's public housing community, serving, supporting, and empowering families of young children with disabilities. Currently, in her role as a Training & Technical Assistance (TA) provider, she supports school divisions in superintendent's regions one and eight to address the needs of our youngest citizens in the area of inclusive practices within early childhood settings. Within her scope of practice, she lends a voice to conversations regarding equitable access and treatment of young children, their families, and the community at large.

Larry Frazier

Larry Frazier was born and raised in King William County, Virginia, a small rural county with 17,000 residents. Larry is an African American male raised in a two-parent household consisting of his mother, father, and three siblings. Larry, a heterosexual, cisgender male, is married to a heterosexual cisgender female named Regina. Larry is a Christian, specifically a Baptist, and serves in leadership in the church he grew up in.

Education and community service have always been very important to Larry and his family. Larry is a first-generation college graduate who earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from The Virginia State University, an Historically Black University. Larry's HBCU experience was quite different from his experience growing up in rural King William. Larry is an educator, his experience includes serving as a special education teacher, a building administrator, central office director, and currently superintendent of schools. Larry is one of the youngest superintendents in Virginia and, as a Black male, is in the minority with this role.

Through Larry's experience, being active in school divisions, his church, fraternity, and community Larry is passionate about giving to others and supporting the needs of others despite their differences and challenges. His career and adult life focused on removing barriers so children and those in need can be successful. Larry, by nature, is a leader and values mentoring and fostering others, especially those in underrepresented groups, in reaching their full potential.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

School districts in rural communities across the country, such as Charles City County, Virginia, face unique and complex challenges. Their community members tend to experience higher poverty rates than suburban and urban communities (Tickamyer, 2020). They frequently have limited access to basic necessities such as grocery stores, as a result of a growing number of food deserts (Feeding America, 2021). Additionally, rural communities face disproportionately high unemployment rates (Economic Research Service, 2021). These challenges have myriad and deep effects across all members of the community, including its children. When some of the most basic physiological needs of a community are not being met, such as access to adequate nutrition, clothing, and resources, it is exceedingly difficult for a school district to effectively fulfill its mission to educate students and help them fulfill their higher levels of potential (Maslow, 1943).

In 2016, a small team of professionals consisting of the school social worker, special education supervisor, and the information technology resource teacher from Charles City Public Schools (CCPS) sought to address the problem of how to help meet the basic needs of those students who did not readily have access to such resources. Their efforts led to the implementation of a weekend back-pack initiative. This program was a fast success, and they were able to expand to a more permanent resource room (Antoine, 2021). Through their efforts, they came to see how the needs of their students were intrinsically tied in with the needs of the broader Charles City community. As a result, the program grew in popularity and evolved into what is now known as the Community Den.

In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the team from CCPS realized that they lacked the appropriate infrastructure and expertise to grow the program further, even as

need continued to mount. As a result, Charles City school leaders sought the support of a capstone team through Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) doctoral program in leadership, based in the School of Education. In response to a formal Request for Assistance, our capstone team was charged with assessing current and potential resource streams and benchmarking best practices for school-based community resources to create a blueprint that would help ensure a successful and sustainable future for the Community Den.

The county of Charles City is one of the oldest in America, having been originally established in 1619. It is located just 30 miles southeast of Virginia's capital city, Richmond. Despite its proximity to this vibrant urban environment, it is an important example of a county and school district impacted by the many challenges facing rural America. According to publicly available data, the county has a population of slightly over 7,000, making it the 89th largest in Virginia (United States Census Bureau, 2021). With a median age of 50, its residents are generally older than the national median of 38. The population is about evenly split between residents who identify as Black/African American (45.1%) and White (42.3%). There is also an American Indian population (6.5%) and a small but growing Hispanic or Latino population (1.8%). Despite representing 42% of the total population, only 32.5% of the students in Charles City Public Schools are White, with Black/African American students representing a disproportionate 53.3% of the total population. This may suggest that a significant portion of the White students are not attending the public schools in the district, though age structure may also contribute.

Further breakdowns of district demographics indicate that a total of 56.4% of students identified as economically disadvantaged, 16.6% identified as having disabilities, and nearly 3% were homeless. Additionally, 8.9% of all residents are considered food insecure (Feeding

America, 2021). Perhaps the most concerning statistic, however, is that the poverty rate among residents under 18 years is 20.2%, which is significantly higher compared to the national average of 14.4% (United States Census Bureau, 2021). This, of course, means that there is a large population of K-12 students who need considerable services that go beyond the basic academic curriculum, similar to rural districts across the country. As a result, the role the school district such as CCPS plays in providing resources to assist community development efforts is increasingly recognized as essential.

School districts are frequently called upon to meet many of the complex and most urgent needs of a community, particularly in rural areas, although they require considerable support to do so in an effective manner (Showalter, et al., 2017). This became even more clear throughout the COVID-19 pandemic when the needs of community members increased and schools across the country became beacons of support (Hertz & Barrios, 2020**).** Conversely, as the pandemic increased the many needs of the general population, it also shifted what little available resources school districts like CCPS had to other public health measures. This further established the importance of an initiative like the Community Den and a need to take an in-depth look at how to ensure its long-term success and sustainability.

To provide a comprehensive and practical blueprint that will ensure the future success and sustainability of the CCPS' Community Den, we employed a qualitative approach to explore the following guiding research questions:

1. What is the history of and the context for the Community Den?

2. What resources are available to support and sustain the Community Den?

3. What models and best practices currently exist that could inform future practices and operations for long-term sustainability?

We began by conducting a thorough review of existing relevant literature and existing school-based community resource programs. We then reviewed and analyzed demographic data available for Charles City residents, with a particular focus on school-age children. This helped provide an overview of the potential population the Community Den could serve. Our focus then shifted more directly towards the Community Den through a comprehensive analysis of existing documents that detail its history and operations. We also conducted a series of site visits, focus groups, and interviews with stakeholders (families, volunteers, etc.). Throughout this time, we also engaged in a process of asset mapping to conduct a preliminary review of CCPS's available and potential resources. Through this approach, we hoped to gain insight into the proposed research questions and unique needs of the CCPS community. This, ultimately, led to our capstone team creating a blueprint for the Community Den to help support and serve its families for years to come.

Chapter 2: Methodology

As we entered this project, schools across the Commonwealth of Virginia were returning to a "new normal" after eighteen months of mixed delivery instruction within virtual and hybrid settings. Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affected every aspect of teaching and learning, the resulting shutdown uncovered the hidden lack of accessibility to resources across both urban and rural communities. Faced with this unprecedented challenge, Charles City County Public School leaders opened the Community Den to address the immediate needs of their students and families with the goal of eliminating barriers to accessing education that occurred outside of the schoolhouse doors. The future success of the Community Den rests on its ability to build capacity among staff while developing a sustainable plan outlining methods for ongoing access to multiple avenues of resources, both material and human.

Research Questions

The following questions were established to guide the research and response to the request for assistance. We explored the following:

1. What is the history of and context for the Community Den?

    a. How, when, and why was the Community Den created?

    b. What have been the biggest successes and challenges for the Community Den?

    c. Historically, what populations have been the most active users of the Community Den, and what resources have they sought?

    d. What are the most pressing needs of the Charles City community?

    e. How do community and school stakeholders define success for the Community Den?

2. What resources are available to support and sustain the Community Den?

      a.   What financial, human, material, or other resources are currently available to the Community Den?

      b.   What barriers have impacted the Community Den's access to resources?

      c.   What additional resources could be accessed at the local, state, and federal levels?

3. What models and best practices currently exist that could inform future practices and operations?

      a.   What are some exemplars of successful school-based community resource programs?

      b.   What are best practices around recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers in a small, under-resourced community?

      c.   What are the best practices and/or strategies for gaining community support?

      d.   What data collection methods will best support the operation of the Community Den?

Study Design

This study primarily utilized qualitative methods of data collection. It included an extensive process of literature review, asset mapping, document review, site visits, interviews, and focus groups. These approaches allowed the researchers to gain a thorough understanding of the resources available to the Community Den, the needs of the students and community members it serves, and existing best practices in rural community resource and support initiatives.

An initial review of the literature offered context for the project as well as evidence for potential best practices for Charles City to emulate. The available literature on existing and successful community resources guided practices that could positively impact the approach and

final product. Additionally, current demographic data on Charles City's population revealed specific areas in need of focus (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Similarly, a review of the Community Den's available documents provided key insights into its history, practices, successes, and areas needing improvement. Through the asset mapping process, researchers gained a better understanding of the resources, both utilized and unutilized, that could be employed by the Community Den moving forward (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Finally, a series of focus groups and interviews targeted patrons of the Community Den, its administrative team, and community supporters. Interviews and focus groups with community members were designed to better understand their met and unmet needs and explore opportunities for more effective practices. Similarly, interviews and focus groups with the CCPS administrative and support team members offered key information into practical barriers and considerations that might impact future operations.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected and analyzed data in the following three-phased approach. Phase 1 involved conducting a comprehensive review of relevant existing literature review to inform key aspects of the methodology and gain insights into national models and best practices. Phase 2 focused on document review, observations, interviews, and focus groups. During this phase, we collected and analyzed existing documents from CCPS and the Community Den. Additionally, three focus groups and three interview sessions were held between December 2021 and January 2022. Participants included a combination of current and former administrators, employees, volunteers, community supporters, and community members. Phase 3 consisted of a modified version of asset mapping. Asset mapping is a strength-based approach in identifying and providing information about a community's assets and resources. These assets and resources may include

parks, churches, schools, businesses, individuals, and other entities. Thus, the capstone team conducted a modified version of asset mapping to provide CCPS with a starting list of community and school partnership opportunities to strengthen and address the needs of children and families in the Charles City community. The list was created based on information obtained from focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis. The list will be shared with the client during the final client presentation and documented in the executive summary. Through this qualitative study utilizing document review, focus groups, interviews, and asset mapping, several themes emerged surrounding the operations of the Community Den and how it serves the CCPS community.

Literature Review

For this literature review, Virginia Commonwealth University's library databases, such as Proquest, ERIC, and EBSCO, were used in conjunction with Google Scholar. Articles and resources were also noted and sought due to their reference and inclusion in other relevant literature. Early search results produced thousands of articles that had to be filtered to more specific topics to meet the needs of the research.

Search topics included the following terms: school-community relations, community-based equity audits, lack of resources in rural areas, rural education, rural school problems, program effectiveness, asset mapping, recruiting volunteer + rural communities, volunteer, rural area, challenges, support, education, best practice, strategies, community characteristics, food monitoring, food waste, inventory control, pandemic relief funds, pandemic relief funds rural schools, Communities in Schools (CIS), school nutrition, community eligibility provision (CEP) program, free breakfast, free lunch, rural schools technology, wraparound, school programs, support, children effective services, historical, volunteer services, building

capacity, training, pandemic, Boys and Girls Clubs, The National Council of Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States of America **(**YMCA),Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America (YWCA), community resources, strategies, and frameworks.

The literature review presented several obstacles as the initial timeframe for the search was 2010–2021, spanning 11 years. Due to the inability to find a substantial amount of relevant research, the search had to be broadened iteratively to gather relevant and resourceful literature dating as far back as 1943, including a piece written by noted mid-century psychologist, Abraham Maslow. Search terms also went through an iterative process to specifically focus on the relevant challenges specific to the topic of this study and the needs and supports that address the needs of the Community Den. The topics that were observed the most from initial search results primarily addressed needs related to mental health services and medical services and treatments in rural areas. Approximately 90 articles were deemed relevant and applicable to addressing the challenges a district like CCPS would have to remove barriers to student success and necessary resources.

The initial stages of the literature review involved an iterative process of narrowing search terms. Several topics emerged that were included in our review. These included the intersection of school and community in rural environments, the unique challenges rural schools and communities face related to resource procurement, availability of state and federal resources, such as the National School Lunch Program's CEP and pandemic-specific relief funding, and best practices for establishing school-based community resource centers. This capstone project will focus on the literature that presents practical guidance on best practices for the various administrative tasks central to operating the Community Den. The information included in the

literature review was selected as the having highest impact and applicability to the blueprint we are creating.

Document Review

We conducted a review of pertinent documents to obtain historical, background, and operational information about the Community Den. Documents included materials relating to:

- the history of the Community Den

- donors and contributors

- resources

- schedules

- users and utilization records

- attendance

- finances

These documents were reviewed to better understand the Community Den's operation and provide feedback and suggestions on improving processes. Information gleaned from the document review also assisted in asset mapping and determining additional community-based resources that can be utilized to support the efforts of the Community Den. The approach to analyzing this information was entirely dictated by the type of documents provided. It was generally qualitative and primarily used to provide historical context, however, some quantitative information was available, particularly related to attendance.

Upon request, the primary contact from CCPS provided the research team with a one-inch binder that contained approximately 100 pages of documents. She shared that this contained all the documents collected or created by the Community Den since its inception. Through an initial review of the materials, it was evident that there was no clear system for

organizing the materials or consistency in records keeping. The documents could be categorized

by content as financial records, rosters, forms and flyers, or miscellaneous. The most robust and

informative information came from the rosters and financial records. The financial records

consisted of a handwritten running budget, various purchase receipts, and records of checks and

donations. It was unclear if these records were comprehensive or if some sources of revenue or

expenses may have been missing. Many of the scanned receipts were incomplete, so it was not

possible to discern trends in items purchased.

Observations, Interviews, and Focus Groups

To have a better understanding of the request for assistance and to offer Charles City

relevant recommendations, the capstone team conducted site visits to observe, conduct focus

groups, and interview stakeholders to help answer the research questions below:

1. What is the history of and the context for the Community Den?

2. What resources are available to support and sustain the Community Den?

3. What models and best practices currently exist that could inform future practices and

   operations for long-term sustainability?

In partnership with Charles City and based on knowledge of the district context, these

approaches to data collection were chosen to capture rich information from participants through

the spoken word (Busetto et al., 2020). This occurred through informal conversations with

patrons, noting how they navigated and interacted with the space, and, when possible, inquiring

about their opinions of the resource. Our observations were recorded in a site visit log (see

Appendix A). Observation was an excellent tool for collecting data and the site visits allowed the

capstone team to get to know and build rapport with users of the Community Den. This rapport

affected the depth with which the users felt comfortable in disclosing personal and pertinent

information related to the first two research questions: (1) What resources are available to support and sustain the Community Den and (2) What models and best practices currently exist that could inform future practices and operations for long-term sustainability? The dates for the site visits occurred on the third Tuesday of November and December 2021, when the Community Den was open to the public. A third visit was planned for January 2022, however, it was canceled due to the emergence of the omicron variant of COVID-19. Additionally, two members of the capstone team visited the Community Den to make donations outside of operating hours. It is important to note that these site visits occurred around the holidays, which may have impacted how patrons utilized the resource.

During the site visits, the capstone team originally planned to engage with users through guided conversations consisting of three to five short questions while packing resource boxes to learn users' pressing needs and ways to improve the Community Den. The focus was on the adult population. The research team considered including students in interviews and focus groups, however, the personnel at CCPS suggested this could present some concerns from parents and may result in negative feedback about the research team's engagement. Ultimately, the conversations were less structured as originally planned and more informal in nature. Notes from the conversations were documented in a log, based on memory. They include the setting, location, what was observed, date, timeframe, and the activity being performed.

Finally, according to Creswell (2013), qualitative data collection is a phenomenological study involving in-depth interviews with participants. Hence, focus groups are effective in that they can provide qualitative data and in-depth insights. Following the response for the assistance presentation (RFA), Charles City sent a list of people who were instrumental in using and organizing the Community Den. Under these circumstances, and based on a review of the

literature, the capstone team found both convenience sampling (Merriam, 2009) and snowball sampling (Glesne, 2015) to be useful in identifying focus group participants. Selected participants were emailed an invitation to participate in one of several scheduled virtual focus groups with follow-up calendar invitations with Zoom links sent upon confirmation. These meetings occurred in November and December 2021, with some additional interviews or focus groups taking place in January 2022, to further explore the research questions.

Based on an existing list of various stakeholders provided by CCPS, the capstone team conducted three focus groups and three individual interviews that ranged between 30 and 75 minutes. The first focus group, the administrative/employee support cluster, included five participants. The second focus group, the volunteer/community support and resource partners cluster, targeted four participants. The final focus group, the community members cluster, which included patrons and volunteers, targeted five participants. Due to scheduling and staffing changes, the team conducted individual interviews with three participants: one school administrator, one former administrative employee, and one volunteer. We used similar protocols for each focus group (see Appendix B).

Each focus group session was led by multiple members of the capstone team. One served as a facilitator and the others took notes and/or addressed potential follow-up questions. The Zoom sessions were recorded and uploaded to Kaltura for transcription. Upon completion of the focus groups and interviews, the capstone team analyzed the findings and themes that emerge from the conversations.

It is important to note that research methodology was impacted globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Thompson, 2020). Consequently, the capstone outlined in the methods the collection of supporting documents and conduction of interviews and focus groups. Public safety

protocols from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance as well as mitigation procedures in place for the Charles City Public Schools' community. Thus, the following considerations were used throughout the data collection process:

- Masks were worn by all members of the capstone team during site visits.

- Focus groups and interviews were conducted via a virtual format using Zoom.

- During site visits, social distancing was maintained per all Virginia Commonwealth University and Charles City Public Schools' guidance.

- Meetings to share progress and updates with the Charles City Public Schools' community were held virtually by the capstone team.

Heart Work

From the onset of this project, the anticipated work spoke to the hearts of the capstone team, as evident through the positionality of each team member. The researchers' work history has centered around removing barriers and helping those in need within marginalized communities. During the initial site observation, the team was reminded of the "why" (Sinek, 2011) behind this work. Having the opportunity to actively support the work of the Community Den with immediate tasks like hanging clothes, purging, and assisting patrons was both rewarding and eye opening to the team. The Den's patrons were open, and the research team delighted in informal conversations that later shaped how their approach to the focus groups and interviews.

The research team has created a technical document based on scholarly literature, document reviews, and best practices; however, the heart work of the team is deeply entrenched in supporting the Charles City community. The team sees the ongoing work of the Community Den as an extension of its purpose and intentionality to broaden its scope, while facilitating and

building the capacity of the CCPS stakeholders through the development of a blueprint and toolbox for sustainability.

Asset Mapping

To better gauge possible school-community partnerships opportunities available for Charles City, the capstone team conducted an abbreviated version of community-based asset mapping. The modified version followed a four-step approach to developing a list of community-based resources to support the Community Den. Embedded in these steps were opportunities for school teams to engage in activities consistent with leadership, advocacy, and collaboration. This process provided the Community Den's coordinators an outline for creating a community map should they decide to do so. The typical steps for asset mapping are outlined below:

1. Develop a multidisciplinary team.

2. Examine and assess a current list of identified resources, services, and programs, and identify new ones.

3. Contact individual and community resources.

4. Develop and maintain a community resource guide, and map (Griffin & Farris, 2010).

Due to the scope of the project and working with a unique school district, the capstone team recognized the potential to be seen as outsiders with the Charles City community. The team kept this in mind while focusing on Steps 1 and 2 of the asset mapping process. Due to the capstone team's background in working with diverse populations, the team served as initial members of a multidisciplinary team to compile a list of potential assets as identified by interviews, focus groups and document analysis. The capstone team decided that Steps 3 and 4

would need to be led by the CCPS team to promote stronger collaborative relationships with an emphasis on school and community resources .

Most data collected was qualitative, namely the results of interviews, focus groups, asset mapping, and literature review. Some quantitative data, such as financial records or inventory lists, were collected through the asset mapping and document review process, which was similarly factored into the overall analysis. The researchers conducted this thorough analysis to identify common themes and standout practices and models. These were organized into common themes around the research questions and then compared and synthesized into a series of high-impact, practically feasible, and locally relevant practices to be presented as results and recommendations.

A comprehensive approach was employed throughout the process. The goal was to accurately represent and understand CCPS, the Community Den, and the available data and literature to effectively respond to the initial problem of practice. Data collection began in September 2021 through the literature review process and concluded in February 2022. An overview of the timeline for data collection is available in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Data Collection and Analysis

Data	Description	Source	Dates	Analysis
Review of literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles Census data Organizational reports	Databases accessed through Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries and Google Scholar General Google searches U.S. Census	August–September 2021	Themes, best practices, exemplar programs connection to other areas of research, demographics
Review of Charles City County Public Schools' (CCPS) documents	Financial Records, Rosters, Forms and Flyers	CCPS	November 2021	History, resources, procedures, utilization
Interviews and focus groups	Conduct interviews and focus groups with Community Den patrons and CCPS employees	CCPS	November 2021–February 2022	History, needs assessment, opportunities for growth, operational barriers
Asset mapping	CCPS resources, existing community partnerships, potential future partnerships, state and federal resources	CCPS, U.S. Department of Education, Virginia Department of Education	February 2022	Establish viable resource sources

Limitations

   This study had several limitations, the first being the transition of the primary client contact. This individual was responsible for submitting the RFA and served as one of the founding members of the Community Den. Following the departure of the team member, the capstone team had to transition to working with two additional Charles City Public Schools (CCPS) personnel, of which on individual was reluctant to serve as the primary contact due to their current workload and the other being a recently hired by CCPS without previous experience with the Community Den. The second limitation was the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic paired with the emergence of the delta and omicron variants. The risks associated with COVID-19 impacted the capstone team plan to volunteer and conduct onsite visitations to interact with patrons of the Community Den. The next limitation was time and resources which affected the team's ability to have access to the Community Den's patrons and physical access to the Den itself. At the onset of the project, it was shared by CCPS staff that some users of the Community Den did not have internet access to participate in virtual focus groups nor answer online surveys. Thus, the best approach was to meet with patrons face-to face to conduct onsite interviews. The final limitation was the Community Den's limited hours of operation. The coordinators of the Community Den both have full time positions with CCPS and view coordinating the Community Den as a labor of love to help meet the needs of the community. Hence, the Community Den is only open for four hours on the third Tuesday of each month due to the workload of the coordinators. The last aspect of the time limitation is that the capstone team was only able to visit the Community Den before the holiday season during the months of November and December 2021.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Resource Limitations in Rural Schools/Communities

Rural communities benefit from long standing interconnected social and familiar relationships that serve as the foundation for educational settings as well as the community at large. Many rural school districts face unique challenges that stem from the demographic and economic state of their community. Statti and Torres (2020) note these include fewer resources, geographic isolation, challenges in staff recruitment and retention, administrative burdens, student poverty, and demographic shifts. Furthermore, these unique factors are just a few of the limitations rural districts contend with as they work to put their students on a trajectory toward college, career, and civic success. While these limitations appear as challenges, the interconnectedness of rural communities demonstrates strength and perseverance. Challenges such as insufficient funding, poverty, access to technology, and teacher recruitment have been well-examined in the literature.

Insufficient Funding

A chief problem faced by rural public schools is an overall lack of funding. A 2018 Urban Institute brief on school district funding in Virginia noted it takes more resources to educate disadvantaged students, and rural schools can be more expensive to operate because of lower economies of scale. The brief also revealed Virginia's school districts average a per-pupil funding rate of $10,627 with rural districts receiving $329 less per student in comparison to other schools in the state (Lou et al., 2018).

Likewise, according to a 2018 report published by the Center for Public Education, typically, rural school districts receive less funding because of their smaller populations, but a lower student population does not always correspond with lower costs. With students in rural

districts spread out over a larger geographical area, transportation costs per student tend to be high. Despite comprising half of all districts and serving one in five students, on average nationwide, rural school districts receive just 17 percent of state education funding (Lavalley, 2018). Smaller rural schools are often at a disadvantage for funding in other ways. For example, the Title I funding formula emphasizes the number of students in poverty rather than the percentage of a school's students that are in poverty. In addition, many rural schools have a small staff that may not have the time or training to complete applications for competitive grants. Even when rural schools do receive grant money, if it is awarded based on student population size, the amount awarded may not be significant (Lavalley, 2018).

Poverty in Rural Communities

Approximately 64% of rural counties have high rates of child poverty, as compared to 47% of urban counties (Schaefer et al., 2016). Children living in poverty face several educational disadvantages. Children from low-income homes are more likely to experience food, housing, and energy insecurity and are more likely to suffer from poor nutrition and inadequate healthcare (Schaefer et al., 2016). Thus, adopting a community-based model that incorporates a strengths-based approach to developing solutions to a problem within the community is essential to maximizing educational advantages (Arriero & Griffin, 2018; Dorfman, 1998; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Lightfoot et al., 2014). Children experiencing poverty are less likely to have adequate resources at home and have less access to enriching activities outside of school. Additionally, these children enter school with a readiness gap that grows as they get older. Students living in poverty are more likely to drop out of college or never attend college (Tieken, 2016).

Access to Technology

Broadband connects teachers to students, parents, as well as educational resources and opportunities. Moreover, it expands course options, such as AP, online, and remedial courses. Without adequate infrastructure for high-speed internet, rural schools and the students they serve will be left behind (Hlinka et al., 2015). An article published by the Federal Communication Commission, highlighted that although the federal government has invested in broadband communications across the country (Wheeler, 2014), rural schools and communities still have insufficient coverage when compared with their non-rural counterparts (Vogels, 2021). While districts across the country increased their use of technology in the classroom particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many rural districts did not have an infrastructure in place to allow them to do the same. Problems with connectivity, costs, and budget constraints prevented many rural schools, let alone the students they serve, from having an adequate internet connection at all (Wheeler, 2014). Notably, a 2021 Pew Research Center report showed that rural adults remain less likely than suburban adults to have home broadband and less likely than urban adults to own a smartphone, tablet computer, or traditional computer (Vogels, 2021). Without internet access, students from rural areas are excluded from a vast number of educational resources.

Challenges with Teacher Recruitment

Developing effective strategies to retain and recruit teachers is an essential and ongoing goal for rural school administrators. School leaders in the rural setting often contend with geographic isolation, inadequate professional development, lower base salaries, as well as difficulty managing the workload requirements are structural issues that may discourage new teachers from applying for careers in school districts located in rural settings (Jimerson, 2003;

Martin & Mulvihill, 2016; Monk, 2007; Provasnik et al., 2007; Reeves, 2003; Tran & Smith, 2019; Viadero, 2018). Recruitment is complicated by the fact that there has been a substantial loss of the existing teacher workforce due to retirement, low salaries, lack of public appreciation and respect, and dissatisfaction with teaching conditions (Jimerson, 2003). These conditions may be some of the factors that are leading to reports of teacher shortages across the nation. In 2018, Viadero reported that in an analysis of federal education data from 2016–2018, statewide teacher shortages were reported in all 50 states. This is particularly problematic in rural settings where some of these factors may be amplified due to the nature of living and working in a rural environment (Viadero, 2018).

Identifying Available Resources Within Rural Communities

Funding and resources are essential components to supporting the needs of students and school communities; however, resources and support can be more difficult to acquire in small rural communities. Often when school leaders pursue funds for resources outside of traditional instructional resources, they tend to seek donations from private or corporate sponsors or community-based organizations (Zimmer & Krop, 2003). Schools often rely on community partnerships to support the needs of students and families (Castro, 2016). When schools access resources such as food banks, clothes closets, dental services, and medical services, they can remove barriers and challenges the most marginalized students face. Resources and programs such as the Communites Communities In School (CIS), and American Rescue Plan Funds all serve as examples of supports that remove barriers for student success.

Community Eligibility Provision

The need to support students and families to end hunger and food insecurities can be seen across the nation. Before the pandemic, children received free or reduced breakfast and lunch based on household income and a certification process. The national breakfast and lunch programs are well-established and effective programs that can help remove barriers of hunger to improve student success. In 2010, an extension of the National School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch program called the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) was enacted through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act to provide additional access to nutritious meals to all moderate- and low-income children, free of charge, when 40% or more of the school population qualify as free-eligible through other programs such a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Tan et al., 2020).

CEP has been shown to benefit students, families, and school divisions by removing the administrative processes of collecting and certifying students for free and reduced lunch. CEP allows school divisions to be reimbursed for the total number of meals served for breakfast and lunch to eligible students. Components of CEP offer meals to students during the school year and summer months when children often go hungry due to a lack of resources. Based on April 2021 data retrieved from the Virginia Department of Education, 923 schools in Virginia are eligible for the program, yet only 773 schools participate in CEP. School nutrition reports show Charles City Public Schools currently participates in CEP with an identified student percentage of 54.12% qualifying both schools in the division to participate and serve 571 students based on data from April 1, 2021. This participation is one tool that can continue to be used to decrease childhood hunger and to support students within the school division. Sixty-nine out of 132 public school divisions in Virginia participate in the CEP program (VDOE School Nutrition, 2021). As is the

case with many other school resources, one size does not fit all in terms of supporting the needs of students.

Communities in Schools (CIS)

Supporting schools and students, particularly those considered at-risk, is the function of the nationwide organization CIS (Porowski & Passa, 2011). Based on the information retrieved from the CIS website, the organization currently supports nearly 2,500 schools and over 1.6 million students. The most recent data from CIS indicates that during the 2018–2019 school year, 48,159 students were served by CIS in Virginia's schools, alone. While CIS is a nationwide program, it offers smaller subsets and affiliates which are located in states and communities. The focus of CIS is to connect students and families to essential community resources and supports while working under the five principles of what every student needs:

- a one-to-one relationship with a caring adult,

- a safe place to learn and grow,

- a healthy start in life,

- a marketable skill to use upon graduation, and

- a chance to give back to peers and community (Porowski & Passa, 2011).

CIS of Richmond, through their 2018 annual report, highlighted their success in mobilizing community resources to meet the non-academic barriers faced by students. CIS focuses on how they can assist children and families meet basic needs, such as food, housing, and clothing, while also meeting students' social and emotional needs. CIS is also known for working side by side with schools to improve culture and climate while focusing on promoting positivity within school buildings (Communities in Schools of Richmond, 2018).

CIS of Virginia and affiliate branches have been supportive of schools and school divisions across the state. CIS is always looking for ways to grow and support more students to stay on the path toward success. The process of school divisions beginning a CIS partnership is initiated when school divisions identify the need for additional student support. Once division superintendents or division administration enter a partnership with CIS of Virginia, CIS begins assisting in conducting a community needs and assets assessment to understand the existing resources accessible within the community. CIS also looks at what resources they can help broker and gain an understanding of the district's primary goals that align with the goals of CIS, such as chronic absenteeism, school climate, and learning loss (Dalton, 2021).

The proximity of Charles City County to Richmond could benefit Charles City due to the Richmond CIS affiliate. According to CIS of Virginia, each school division that partners with the organization are expected to support the cost of the site coordinator in each partner school. The cost varies per district, depending on the job market, cost of living, and other factors. If an interested district is outside the footprint of an existing affiliate, CIS of Virginia will consider incubating the new division and establishing a new affiliate, with the intent that that new affiliate becomes independent within two to three years. If the interested district is near an existing affiliate, there is an opportunity for it to be included in the affiliate's expansion plan. However, many operational and community-specific variables come into play in such a decision (J. Dillon, personal communication, September 15, 2021).

Pandemic Relief Funds to Support Students and Schools

For years, many schools have struggled with the basic needs of school infrastructure, heating and cooling, and supplies for their educational programs. In recent years, the need for non-academic support for students has become more prevalent and necessary for schools and

students to be successful. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government saw the needs of schools and families increase and provided pandemic funding aid to support schools across the country. Schools have been encouraged to use funds to make "seismic changes that will benefit students for generations to come" (Binkley et al., 2021). While some school districts can use pandemic funding for construction and other big picture purchases, other districts are forced to use the funding on the school district's basic needs, such as nurses, cleaning supplies, books, and the reinstatement of elective courses (Binkley et al., 2021).

Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government established free breakfast and free lunch for all school-age children regardless of income and poverty status. This has been a tremendous aid to families and students as school districts have developed several feeding models to ensure that students have had access to meals during the pandemic. While this makes CEP no longer necessary for the current school year there has been little indication that meals will continue to be free for all students outside of CEP after the pandemic. Over the last year, school districts have been able to use the pandemic relief funds to pay front-line workers to assist in feeding students and in the deep cleaning of schools.

Receiving pandemic relief funds has been a significant benefit to rural schools. For many years rural schools have struggled with internet connectivity, technology equipment, infrastructure, and updated school facilities (Abumalloh et al., 2021). Anderson (2021) noted pandemic relief funds have allowed school divisions to utilize funds to increase the number of laptops and or Chromebooks for students; create hubs in communities for students to have internet access; provide individual hotspots to students and staff; and upgrade facilities to include additional classroom space, heating, air conditioning, and ventilation systems, and areas for flexible grouping seating. Furthermore, pandemic relief funds have also provided student

supports that address learning loss, summer academies and remediation, and support staff to address students' social, emotional, and well-being. Using federal funds for these initiatives has freed up local funds to support other needs for students. When school divisions make budget adjustments, students have been able to gain access to other community-based resources such as clothing, school supplies, and personal hygiene products. School divisions face the challenge of sustaining funding after the conclusion of the spending period in 2024. Effective planning and strategic budgeting are essential to continue support for students long-term (Educational Research Strategies, 2021). Pandemic relief funds for schools have been a tremendous asset to meeting the needs of students.

Best Practices for Operating a School-Based Community Resource Center

A systematic approach to change and overall capacity building requires an organization to examine the best practices as defined within the scholarly literature. For this project, literature related to historical organizations with deep community engagement philosophies was explored. Secondly, establishing a procedure for identifying the availability of resources within the target community through an asset mapping process. Third, recruitment, training, and retention of volunteers to support the community's initiatives. Finally, the use of comprehensive programmatic assessment for continuous improvement opportunities.

Model Community Engagement Programs

Exploring historical organizations grounded in community engagement like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the Harlem Children's Zone, provides an opportunity to examine critical elements of their success. Further, considering their organizational evolution will assist in developing an initial blueprint for a new community-based resource. The initial frameworks for these organizations defined their "why"

(Sinek, 2011) specifically to address the immediate needs of the communities in which they were located. Over time they broadened their scope to scale up their current services and widen their overall impact within the communities served.

Garnering Community Support for Rural Schools

Community support of public schools is essential to the success and well-being of students and the school. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) was established in 1996 to assist schools, districts, and states develop partnership programs that acknowledge the importance of family and community engagement in the learning process. Three core principles characterize the NNPS reform. The first of these is a broad definition of family and community engagement based on Epstein's (2011) framework of six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. The second core principle of the NNPS reform is a team approach to partnership program design and implementation. The third principle is a goal-focused approach to school, family, and community partnerships to achieve measurable academic and behavioral outcomes for students (Epstein, 2009). Principals, as key decision-makers, problem solvers, and agents of change at the school level, are essential actors in a systems approach to education reform (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Hierarchical linear modeling analyses showed that principals' support for family and community engagement and schools' reports of district assistance contributed significantly to schools' basic reform implementation and "to advanced outreach to involve all families in their children's education" (Epstein., 2011).

While rural schools often benefit from supportive relationship networks that take root in small communities (Rose, 1995), educational leaders within rural settings are faced with unique challenges when asked to locate, secure, and distribute a variety of needed resources within their

communities. Indeed, a school leader's responsibility extends beyond the reach of the school building. They are charged with the overall wellbeing of the community. Rural schools play central roles in their communities and rural education scholars advocate for rural school-community partnerships to support school and community renewal (Zuckerman, 2020). Often school leaders will approach a single organization seeking to satisfy a specific goal when allocating funds by investing in initiatives that use the fewest resources to make the greatest impact (Prange et al., 2016).

Like the aforementioned programs, such as YMCA, YWCA and NNPS, educational leaders are exploring ways to bridge gaps by utilizing a conceptual framework like cross-sector collaboration (Henig et al., 2016) . Cross-sector collaboration is a process where various community organizations come together to collectively focus their expertise and resources on a complex issue of importance (Henig et al., 2016). These educators and community leaders establish outcomes that will demonstrate the most "collective impact" (Kania & Kramer, 2011) across the target areas of need.

The lived experiences and cultures of families, students, and stakeholders in the rural context matter (Harmon & Butler, 2019). Rural families often have deep roots in a community, dense relational networks, and strong intergenerational bonds that serve to strengthen community norms, values, and attitudes (Bauch, 2001). The intersection of a rural background and diverse social identities shapes the narratives of self that students from rural areas internalize (The Editors, 2022). Thus, stakeholders must consider the impact of community focused engagement that may not address the needs of all its citizens. School leaders serving rural communities that desire to create initiatives that build capacity and sustainability would benefit from fostering the following six types of connections between families, schools, and communities: social capital,

sense of place, parent involvement, church ties, school and business agency relationships, and community as a curricular resource. These areas are accessible and matter in the development of school success, particularly in small isolated rural school communities (Bauch, 2001). Garnering active community support within rural communities can be challenging; however, capitalizing on cross-sector collaboration, while considering the types of unique connections between families, schools, and the community, offers school leaders an opportunity to tailor these frameworks to meet the needs of their communities.

Asset Mapping to Optimize Resources

Community asset mapping is a strength-based approach to community development that calls for schools and the community to collaborate to find resources that benefit and enhance both environments. The goal of asset mapping is to document a community's existing resources, incorporating these strengths into community development work. The process of asset mapping incorporates three levels of resources that are available to consider for community asset mapping (Jasek-Rysdahl, 2001; Kerka, 2003; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The first level consists of the skills and capacities of individuals living within the community. The second level focuses on citizen associations, and the third level consists of businesses, local government, hospitals, education, and human service agencies. The fundamentals of community asset mapping are that all formal and informal organizations play a role in addressing community, student, and school needs (Jasek-Rysdahl, 2001; Kerka, 2003; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Grounded in the research conducted by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), community asset mapping comes from the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) conceptual framework, which stipulates that people and organizations can serve as assets that are used to create change in communities. Kretzmann and McKnight identified five major assets that could

be used to create positive change in communities: the skills and capacities of the individuals who live in the communities, associations within the communities, institutions such as government agencies, businesses, hospitals, libraries, and local businesses, the potential for economic development, land, and physical buildings.

Community Asset Mapping

Community asset mapping has been commonly used across multiple sectors. Those within the field of public service have used asset mapping to promote and communicate resources to their users. For example, The University of California, Los Angeles Center for Mental Health offers its services to various students, faculty, and parent groups in the school by providing them with a list of resources for psychosocial problems (UCLA, n.d.). In 2001 the Arizona Children's Action Alliance developed a resource tool kit for school-age children along with steps on how to access existing program resources available in the community (Nagle, 2003). School leaders in Lexington, Kentucky utilized community asset mapping to develop a comprehensive resource guide that better-connected children with disabilities to resources (Crane & Skinner, 2003). The United Way of Benton and Franklin communities in Washington were explicitly tasked with developing and implementing a plan that addressed the growing demands on the health and human service sector.

The United Way of Benton and Franklin communities, and Washington team utilized community asset mapping to gain awareness of multiple programs and services available to the local community, untapped resources, awareness of areas where resources were severely lacking, and strengthen already existing partnerships to better meet the needs of their communities (Community Solutions, 2007). Specifically, Griffin and Farris's (2010) four-step community asset mapping approach has been used by schools for over a decade. This model was modified

from Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), specifically for use by school counselors to secure resources to help meet the needs of their school populations since school counselors often refer students, families, and staff to outside school or support. Utilizing community asset mapping allows for school staff to identify resources, access and utilize existing resources and community partnerships thus allowing for the incorporation of resources both inside and outside of the school to meet the needs of the students from a strength-based perspective (Griffin & Farris, 2010).

Recruiting and Sustaining Volunteers

Historically, volunteerism has been the proverbial backbone of economically challenged and underserved communities in times of need (Owens et al., 2020). This is most evident in both rural and urban environments; however, the challenges of bridging the gap between these two vital elements of the communities are well documented regarding rural settings. Schools play an essential role in supporting rural community life, whereby they act as cultural, recreation, and social centers (Oncescu & Giles, 2013). The schoolhouse has served as a haven for students, families, and community members. Understanding the overall needs and resources within an educational environment creates the contextual lens used by school leaders and community members to define their organization's volunteerism practices. Rural communities are subject to vulnerabilities that impact the availability of their citizens to serve as volunteers (Oncescu & Giles, 2013). The rural landscape may be impacted by accessibility to transportation, lack of large industry willing to support volunteerism unlike in an urban setting, access to college and university campuses, and a senior population with limited mobility that may prevent them from participating in volunteer opportunities within the community (Shrestha & Cihlar, 2004).

School leaders serving these communities encounter uniquely rural conditions that affect volunteer engagement and highlight the need for a strategic and intentional approach to volunteer recruitment, training, and sustainability (Shrestha & Cihlar, 2004). Leaders have begun to rethink how volunteerism functions in rural environments. Having a strong volunteer capacity to provide programs, events, and functions is vital when resources are limited (Oncescu & Giles, 2013). According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2005), volunteer recruitment, training, and management practices that support sustainability can be addressed in the following ways:

- Develop a volunteer recruitment plan that includes assessing the organizational image; deciding how to recruit; developing the organization's message; and finding, selecting, and screening volunteers.

- Develop an orientation program with identified trainers and targeted materials that support your organization's implementation practices.

- Managers can support the sustainability of volunteers through regular communication, guidance, and feedback. Activities to avoid burnout and recognition for efforts within the organization.

Equally important to building a sustainable volunteer program to support the overall operations of an organization long-term, would be the development of an operations manual. An operations manual is instrumental to the onboarding of new volunteers, while serving as a resource for current volunteers. It will outline the mission, vision, training guidelines, policies, and standard operating procedures (Ellis, 2002). Creating an operations manual is a low-cost way to ensure the consistency of service delivery within an organization. Thus supporting operations during episodes of volunteer and staff turnover, departures, and transitions. When looking to

improve or streamline a practice, creating an operation manual is a vital step in the implementation of an improvement plan. Below are some items to consider addressing in an operations manual:

- Document Processes.

- Define/Outline Organizational Policies.

- Specify Organizational Hierarchy and Job Roles.

- Write Job Descriptions and Contact Details.

- Clarify the Emergency Response Plan.

- Create a Centralized Location for the Operations Manual (Ellis, 2002).

Specifically, utilizing these practices to support the overall operations of the Community Den by developing a robust volunteer plan will aid in the continuous recruitment and onboarding of volunteers, while offering guidance for CCPS stakeholder to improve or streamline overall practices. Creating and implementing a systematic intentional approach to volunteer engagement within rural communities that support educational environments allows school leaders to collaborate with stakeholders and capitalize on the untapped wealth of human capital available within the community.

Best Practices for Sustaining Community Centers

Meeting the multifaceted needs of the communities they serve is the mission of many helping organizations. Notably, the YMCA identifies four core values, caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility, to approach programming intentionally and consciously (YMCA, 2019). Their goal was to meet the social needs of the community from the start. Those core values were evident in the development of both their vision and mission statements. Similarly, the BGCA approach for positive youth development within the community features three key areas:

establishing an environment that is safe, positive, and inclusive; relationships that are supportive, meaningful, and healthy; and experiences that foster a sense of belonging while building upon strengths (BGCA, 2020). The Harlem Children's Zone provides wraparound services to combat intergenerational poverty by creating pathways specifically in the areas of self-sufficiency, personal growth, and physical, mental, and emotional health (Page & Stone, 2010). The pipeline approach is designed to support families and children of all ages with a focus on overall child outcomes (Page & Stone, 2010).

Each of these organizations highlights the use of program assessments that address outcomes and data usage to gauge their beneficial effects. Incorporating an element of continuous improvement can serve as a best practice within organizations to maximize their overall impact (BGCA, 2020). For example, BGCA (2020) revamped their process for assessing the effectiveness of their target program's goals on the outcomes of their members by articulating a new theory of change called formula for impact. They measure positive outcomes in three areas: academic success, good character, and citizenship via their national youth outcomes initiative. The National Youth Outcomes Initiative is designed to collect ongoing demographic, attendance, and participation data for registered members within local chapters that is later compiled as a representative sample of the national membership. The club member survey is distributed each spring to measure youth achievement and club perception to assess the high-quality experiences of the participants. The data collected is used to inform continuous improvement, planning, and operational decisions; make improvements to programs and services; and demonstrate their impact to donors and stakeholders (BGCA, 2017). Although these organizations approach their work differently, their overall "why" (Sinek, 2011) is rooted in and shaped by their response to an explicit need within the communities they serve. The

foundational elements and conceptual framework utilized by these organizations offer insight into how smaller organizations can begin to build their framework to create a sustainable environment and build capacity among staff.

Given that larger food banks have access to a network of resources such as food distribution, food assistance programs, media relations, innovative technology, and funds, smaller pantries are encouraged to partner with larger agencies. Linkage to large hunger relief organizations such as Feed America can provide smaller local-based pantries with access to resources for little to no cost. These benefits can aid smaller agencies in meeting their goal of providing essential food assistance to their community. Other benefits may include guidance on improvement strategies for the staff, access to valuable statistics regarding user demographics, item inventory, documenting major costs, donor contributions, sponsor contacts, and media exposure that can lead to additional funding. When smaller organizations partner with larger agencies, they can broaden their scope by reaching untapped communities whose needs may have been under-sourced.

Subsequently, there is very little peer-reviewed literature examining the use of data collection concerning community resource centers, suggesting that this is an important area of research that has not received appropriate focus. Thompson et al. (2019) discuss the importance of data collection regarding the operation of food pantries and note a small but growing body of scholarly literature focused on food pantry sustainable capabilities. The article also noted that more specifically, although food banks can and do provide food and assistance directly to community members, they require partnering with other smaller agencies to do secondary distribution to meet their aims of addressing hunger and food insecurity on a larger scale (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2013).

School leaders are charged with understanding the unique challenges of a rural community and depend on the community's ability to identify, secure, and maintain resources to support students and their families. The best practices discussed in the literature will aid in creating a systematic blueprint for CCPS school leaders and community members. The aforementioned best practices offer an opportunity to re-examine and build on existing resources, both human and material capital, and develop policies and procedures for acquiring additional resources while building capacity for attaining sustainability for the Community Den.

Toxic Charity

Despite the clear need for support a community like Charles City has, and the many potential resources that are available, Robert Lupton (2011) offered caution when engaging in such philanthropic or charitable work. As he explains it, "Giving to those in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy people." Though well-intentioned, social assistance programs can perpetuate the cycle of poverty, creating a class of people both dependent upon and deeply resentful of the support. Lupton presented a framework to avoid such unintended negative outcomes, which serves as a guide for philanthropic and charitable work in his *Oath for Compassionate Service.* Some of the key commitments include empowering a community to do for themselves rather than doing on their behalf, limiting strict one-way giving to only the direst situations, foregoing self-interest to focus on the needs of those being served, listening, and being mindful of what is both said and unspoken, and doing no harm.

Often community organizations employ efficient, structured, and well-defined rules, which is what has made their own organizations successful. However, the same principles that might lead to positive outcomes in business or at the organizational level could have negative

consequences in this context and lead to toxic relationships between those giving, those operating, and those receiving. While programs like the Community Den must develop a system of operations that will help ensure its functionality and sustainability, it is essential that this system allows for the flexibility to meet the needs of the community as new ones come to light and existing ones evolve. As the needs of a community and its members change, so too must the Community Den. The best way to ensure this is to keep the community engaged not only in the receiving end of this charitable work, but in its ongoing operations.

When asked in an interview with The Huffington Post about positive examples of charity, Lupton offered the example of a food pantry co-op system (Kuhn, 2011). In this arrangement, members, or patrons, of the pantry contribute to the pantry, either through financial means or volunteer hours. The power of their collective contributions is far more significant because they are pooled. Further, members of the co-op now have an ownership stake in the pantry and help with its operations, including determining what goods are purchased, shopping on behalf of the collective, and how it is governed. This model empowers patrons, as their small contribution leads to an opportunity for their involvement to go beyond simply receiving charity; they become the donors and operators themselves.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This study utilized a qualitative approach to obtain a better understanding of the overall operations of the community den. We conducted a series of site visits, interviews, and focus groups, and also engaged in a process of asset mapping and document analysis to inform our three initial research questions. These were related to understanding the history and context of the community den, how resources are best managed, and opportunities for growth. Through the data, four significant themes emerged, which include improving access to resources, prioritizing community connection, increasing student engagement, and optimizing the physical space.

Exploring the Context for and History of the Community Den

As we sought to examine our initial research questions about why the Community Den was originally founded and the role it served in the Charles City Community over time, it immediately became clear that it grew out of a mission to improve access to resources for all members of the community. This was a consistent theme throughout all of our conversations, interviews, and focus groups. While the initiative was originally conceived as a way to provide basic resources to students, it quickly expanded well beyond that in scope and impact. Specifically, a few years back professional staff at Charles City Public Schools (CCPS) implemented Tiger Packs, a weekend backpack/ feeding program with the elementary school. Due to the fast success of this initiative, they were able to expand to a more permanent resource room which evolved into what is now known as the Community Den.

Identified Barriers to Resources in a Rural Community

From our conversations with individuals who founded and support the Community Den, it became clear that the initiative was born as a solution to a series of problems all surrounding limitations and barriers to resources. Our review of the literature offered insights into the overall

poverty level that Charles City residents face, which is considerably higher than neighboring suburban and urban communities. Additionally, poverty rates specifically among residents under 18 years of age was higher than national averages (United States Census Bureau, 2021). This population of K-12 students, as well as their adult community members, also faced higher than average rates of food insecurity (Feeding America, 2021). These statistics were echoed through our conversations with the CCPS team.

In addition to having limited financial and personal resources, research revealed that Charles City, like so many other rural communities, has a shortage of places for residents to purchase needed resources such as grocery stores or big-box retailers. As one administrator shares:

> It doesn't matter whether you have $5 or $50 in your pocket. For many of our families, if you want to go to a grocery store for fresh fruit or vegetables, you have to drive 20 miles. That is assuming they even have a car.

Instead, residents rely on non-grocery chain stores and convenience stores. This significantly limits their options, particularly with regard to food choices. Even as the Community Den sought to utilize what minimal funds they had to purchase requested goods, their options were limited to what few stores were in close proximity to the facility.

Working with Resources

Another trend that came up repeatedly for participants was how Community Den resources are secured. There is no set system for procurement or tracking. According to a former CCPS employee who was closely involved with the Den at its start, "We never really put a lot of thought into where the products in the Den would come from, to be honest. Things just always sort of showed up when we needed them." While the idea that the resources patrons needed

would show up was not one that other staff shared, there was a general agreement that there was little attention paid to securing consistent and targeted donors and resources. They were generally reliant on material donations from the community, with the bulk of this coming from local church groups and CCPS employees and families.

Clothing as an Essential Resource.

During our first site visit, it was apparent that the majority of space in the Den was allocated to clothing. Most of the floor space was taken up by racks and shelving units displaying clothes or bags and boxes storing them. There were even several racks of excess clothes left in the halfway, as they couldn't fit into the Den. There was only one small cabinet dedicated to food products, despite this being the original purpose of the initiative, and several shelving units of household goods (cleaning products, personal/sanitary goods, school supplies, etc.). Through our conversations with the CCPS team, the large clothing inventory was identified as both an asset and liability. This was a reliable way for some community members to find needed baby clothes, and both adult professional and casual attire. Additionally, multiple conversations and a review of the financial records (receipts and checks) revealed that they were able to turn the excess and unwanted clothing inventory into a financial resource through a "Clothes to Cash" program. With the exception of two, one-time donations of $500 each, this was their primary source of revenue.

Conversely, there was some concern shared about how much of an emphasis there was on managing the clothes, ultimately to the detriment of other needed resources. As previously discussed, the sheer volume of clothes makes it difficult to design the Den in a manner that is user-friendly and accessible, which will be discussed at length in the fourth and final theme. It also takes up valuable and limited space which could be allocated for other purposes. One of the

primary concerns, however, is that despite the sale of excess clothes being a source of revenue, it may actually be more costly than it is worth. During our initial site visit, several hours were dedicated to simply swapping out old clothes, boxing them up for storage or sale, changing out racks, and cleaning the clutter they cause. This was a tremendous drain on staff time that could be better used for other purposes. Between the need for considerable staff time, the strain on physical space, and the cost of the specific bags they need to place the clothes in, managing clothing as a resource may be a net negative to the Community Den operations unless they are able to identify a more efficient approach.

Non-SNAP Eligible Goods.

During our conversation with staff and several customers of the Community Den, we inquired about the types of resources that were most beneficial. Many of the customers were on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which meant they had some financial assistance purchasing food. This still leaves a considerable gap in other basic necessities. According to one of the regular customers:

> ...there is a need in the county for the students and the surrounding community to have resources such as this from the community, then like school supplies are in high demand. And I know that they're always needed. Clothing, also, you know, household items, cleaning supplies, that sort of thing. Things you can't get with food stamps, um, you know, diapers, wipes, things like that.

Another Community Den patron who was there during our initial site visit shared that cleaning products, such as bleach, were the items she was most excited to see. Since the vast majority of donations are food or clothing, customers are often told that other household items, such as cleaning products or baby products, are not available. During a monthly shopping trip, the

limited financial resources available are predominantly spent in this area. As a result, this emerged as a key area of need for reliable and consistent donations.

Collecting and Utilizing Data

Data collection on patrons and inventory was not a priority according to staff reports, though they acknowledged this could be a potential area for improvement. Staff shared that while they attempted to track the number of individuals who actually came to the Community Den with a sign-in sheet, a review of those rosters revealed inconsistent practices. Based on our review of available (potentially incomplete) attendance rosters there were at least 281 total recorded visits to the Den from 100 unique individuals over a "19-month period". During that time, the Den was closed for three months due to the pandemic, so these numbers more accurately reflect a "16-month period". Staff shared that while they didn't have specific data to offer, anecdotally they recalled that only a small percentage of those visitors were students. While they do not have any specific information on the attendees, they recalled that most were elderly and disabled Charles City community members, parents of CCPS students, and district employees. With such a broad range of users, one of the Community Den's greatest challenges may be how to meet such complex and varied needs.

There was also no consistent approach to using the sign-in sheet, which made it difficult to track overall numbers and historical trends. As an example, over a four-month period, rosters included names (changed here to ensure anonymity) such as "James Smith," "J. Smith", and "Mr. Smith." As we attempted to calculate total individual users and track repeat usage, we had to make best guesses if this was the same individual coming each time or potentially different people. Additionally, there is no information collected to delineate the individual's affiliation

with CCPS to differentiate students, employees, and unaffiliated community members. Some basic and consistent structure in the sign-in process could help collect rich information.

Similarly, there was no discernable system for tracking resources. None of the documents provided included any information about inventory at the Community Den. There were no records to help determine where resources came from (outside of a selection of receipts), what they had on hand, what was taken, or what had been sitting there for prolonged periods of time. The staff was able to share some information about an informal monitoring system to swap out clothes based on the season, but there was no formal way of tracking this or any of their other resources. This prevents them from understanding exactly what inventory they have and considering trends in need over the course of the year. When asked about the history of data collection, one of the CCPS team shared:

> I think at some point, I tried to go there and never got there. …it can start with the basic data points of who is using it, how often they're using it, what are they using it for? And what is even some satisfaction measures, if for lack of a better way to say that, you know, some of that… basic demographic data, as well as a better system for collecting and managing data of information surrounding donors and supporters of the den… Also, who's using it? Why are they using it? What are your needs? So that's it that can be an opportunity to better be able to justify what you're doing and why you're doing it. And then you know, who's from the school? Who's the community what's going on, I think there's just a lot of different pieces. And I attempted at one point to get some of that, and it just… put them in a folder.

Overall, it was evident that the team recognized the missed opportunity when it comes to collecting and utilizing data, as they do not have reliable and objective information on how the

resource is actually being utilized. This appears to be primarily a result of a lack of personnel able to spend the time tracking and analyzing data and no identified system to do so.

Maintaining Open Access

Throughout our conversations, we noted that while the Community Den emerged from a desire to better support CCPS students, and students remain at the core of their work, this was always intended to be a resource for anyone in need. There was a strong emphasis placed on maintaining this ability to be flexible and without restriction to how they operate. As an example, when asked about whether or not they have explored any state or federal funds in the past, one CCPS staff member shared that they had but decided against pursuing this option. They worried that relying on funding sources that stipulated whom they could serve would prevent them from carrying out their intended mission. This was not a trade-off that they were willing to make. Instead, they were looking for ways to get the word out about the Community Den and garner more sources of resources and income organically and from within the local community. In doing so, they would be able to prioritize the local, community focus and support

Managing Resources

Based on document analysis, on-site visits, and focus groups. The following section speaks to targeted areas for increased community partnerships. The areas referenced in this segment touch on the following topics (a) identifying school and community needs, (b) managing growth, (c) the labor for love motivator, (d) asset mapping, and (e) searching for resources in a food desert. The information gathered offered insight on how to enhance further opportunities for school and community engagement partnerships that could benefit the Community Den. The content in this area centered on keeping the positive and productive aspect of the family, school, and community connections spirit that makes up Charles City.

Identifying School and Community Needs

It was evident across the focus groups the desire to remove barriers that impacted students educationally outside of the schoolhouse. Naturally, the start of the discussion centered around the topic of supporting students paired with community connections. Participants were asked about the history of and context for the community den and the universal response was there was a need. One current employee shared "addressing the wellbeing of the whole child, the whole family, and the whole community is paramount and thus contributes to that child's academic success." A former employee referenced the need to deal with a hierarchy of student needs, saying "you have to have clean clothes on in order to learn math. Under these circumstances, the community den was started because educators identified a particular need in the school community. In reflecting on the den origins, one former employee who was with the program at its inception shared "what started off actually was a cabinet in my office space with snacks, mostly granola bars, that sort of thing available for students who might need it just to come in and take, them, that then moved to a closet in my office space that had, again, those snacks, some other food items." A former employee with the program at the beginning offered "we were interested in kind of expanding what we had and making it more available to not only our students and families but maybe to the wider community as a resource." Furthermore, one volunteer recalled the internal need for the city and the gap in available resources:

> We did identify that internal city need, there was a gap in resources for many types of items. The community along with the county had been working to develop a more permanent Food Bank, where you could get food at different places within the city. Items such as toiletries, hygiene, and definitely some of the clothing, were not available…coordinated or well known. So, we, you know, identified that as a need in that

those resources were not readily available within the county because people had to access

other resources outside.

Based on the comments shared across all focus groups, the drive has always been the universal

intent to better support students while also keeping the positive and productive aspect of the

family, school, and community connections spirit that makes up Charles City.

Managing Growth and Keeping it Tight Knit

Participants were asked to discuss what resources they were aware of that are available to

support and sustain the Community Den and if the Den organizers were open to receiving and/or

applying for grant funding. While not everyone agreed, a number of participants expressed a

tension between wanting the Den to grow but not to the point where the Den is constrained by

grant stipulations. Several participants across the focus group clusters shared they did not want to

create the "bureaucracy or red tape" that could bog down the entire process, specifically adding

an additional barrier of tracking who is accessing the Community Den. Multiple participants

from the administrator focus group clearly stated that they "don't want the stipulations that come

with grants and felt apprehensive about the Community Den receiving grant funds." One current

employee verbalized that they were okay with grants, as long as the core values remain, i.e., the

connection, and making sure the community aspect remains. The additional discussion also

referenced that while many focus group participants want grants to help expand den operations,

they want intentional expansion and are not looking for major growth. As the conversation

continued another participant noted the labor of love motivator for those involved with the

Community Den. A *labor of love* is seen as performing work voluntarily without reward or

compensation (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, n.d.). In fact, when speaking with the

program coordinators during the onsite visit and documenting comments from focus group

participants, the phrase "labor of love" was referenced as a motivating factor to keep the Den going during hard times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. One patron of the Community Den and volunteer mentioned "a few of you said a couple of times about the labor of love piece behind what brought you to the den … and what keeps you folding clothes and getting things done and moving. We want to keep the family feel, come in get what you need, no questions asked."

Managing Growing with Community Collaboration

Conversely, some participants felt grant funding might help improve operations overall. One former employee shared*,* "I know, there are grant opportunities out there for most anything…just I never had the time or the knowledge on how to go about finding them." This comment prompted a shift in the discussion centering around other avenues of support and partnerships from the surrounding communities. A few administrators and community supporters believe the community den is well-positioned to receive significant community support. Supporters focused on sharing possible resources such as monetary donations, time, talent, volunteers, supplies, space. During the initial onsite visitation and focus groups, several comments were made surrounding potential community partnerships specifically, connecting with churches in the faith-based community, food banks, and local businesses. Specifically, it was mentioned in 2019 a select group of school leaders engaged in the Title I process. Title I is a federal grant program designed to give educational assistance to students living in areas of high poverty (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Based on this discussion paired with the Title 1 initiative, the capstone team participated in an abbreviated version of asset mapping. Asset mapping is a strength-based approach in identifying and providing information about a community's assets and resources, (business, churches, individuals, parks, schools, etc.) to

ascertain possible school-community partnerships opportunities. This approach yielded a

preliminary list of community-identified assets as identified from the document analysis, focus

groups, and individual interviews. The index of community resources is listed in the table below:

Table 2

Preliminary list of community assets

Name of Resource	Service Provided
Charles City Elementary School Tiger Packs	Weekly food backpacks sent home every Friday.
Promise Land Storehouse	A temporary drive-thru pantry that distributes resources twice a month.
New Hope Pantry	Food pantry for Charles City and New Kent families.
Matthew's Haven	Distributes free diapers and wipes to those in need who live in New Kent or Charles City.
Blessing Boxes	Donations bin for community members to leave items for others in the community.
Little Free Libraries	Boxes with books that anyone can donate to or enjoy

Note. Due to its size and proximity to surrounding counties, the resources and services listed in this table are not only located in Charles City.

Furthermore, it was also referenced that these partnerships could serve as opportunities to strengthen and address the needs of children and families in the Charles City community. Equally important relevant literature suggests that community-school partnerships are integral to the overall academic success of students. Thus, communities that incorporate programs of partnership are important for helping all families support children in education (Bauch, 2001). Likewise, throughout the focus group conversations, there was a shared consensus of incorporating resources to strengthen the community, for the reason that if you strengthen the community, you strengthen families, and ultimately when you strengthen the families you strengthen children, said one current employee during a site. In fact, similar sentiments were shared by other participants surrounding the importance of potential community partnerships specifically connecting with churches in the faith-based community. One volunteer and donor said "all I need to do is send out an email to my church people, and they're gonna come through. So, it's probably more of I haven't really looked for additional resources, not necessarily that they're not there." The same participant stated "we are a small community. And we stick together. I mean, we may not always get along, and we may not always agree, but when somebody is in need, the community is going to come together. And that I mean, that's been all of my life. And that's why I love our community." Another community member and donor explained*: that there is a "grouping of 17 churches not far from Charles City…. who are ready and willing to help the coordinators of the Community Den by offering volunteers and bringing donations for the most requested items." The same participant further stated, "it would be helpful to come up with a communication plan, you know, what are the things y'all need…we will use this for outreach and to communicate out so that is continual." As shared earlier, educators identified a need and set out to address that need through the Tiger Pack initiative and

eventually the Community Den. This need for basic resources was referenced numerous times throughout the focus group clusters. Similarly, another volunteer said:

> Because there is a need in the county for the students and the surrounding community to have resources such as this from the community…like school supplies… that are in high demand. I know that they're always needed. Clothing, household items, cleaning supplies, that sort of thing. Things you can't get with food stamps, um, you know, diapers, wipes, things like that. There's always a need for our den, helping children help the community.

Searching for Resources in a Food Desert

During observations and focus groups sessions, it was mentioned that due to its location and proximity to a grocery store Charles City is considered a food Dessert. A food desert is described as an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food, in contrast with an area with higher access to supermarkets or vegetable shops with fresh foods, which is called a food oasis. The designation considers the type and quality of food available to the population, in addition to the accessibility of the food through the size and proximity of the food stores. Food deserts tend to be inhabited by low-income residents with reduced mobility (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). There appeared to be a joint consensus with all focus group participants agreeing with this label by nodding their heads and verbally agreeing with the food desert comment. One volunteer with the Community Den ended the conversation with the following thought:

> Well, in Charles City, what I've learned is that there is not a grocery store, we have Dollar General, which is like the closest thing to you can get, you know, your perishables and things there. But really, if you're going to go to the grocery store, you have to drive at least 30 minutes, either way, to go somewhere…Charles City in itself has no grocery

store whatsoever, which I thought was kind of interesting. Um, so I know that there's a lot

of need in the community… for food, fresh fruits, and vegetables. And...I stated before

household supplies and things that you can't get with food stamps…I think the

community Den is vital to the community.

Given these points, it was evident across the focus groups the desire to remove barriers that

impacted students educationally outside of the schoolhouse.

Opportunities for Growth

The information gathered from stakeholders during the focus groups, interviews, and site

observations frame the following areas of growth for the Community Den, by first addressing the

increased need for student engagement. Secondly, they address the community's perception of

the purpose and intention of the Den's impact on the overall wellbeing of students. Third,

building the capacity to recruit, train, and utilize students to create a volunteer pool. Finally, the

need to optimize space and increase accessibility, which emerged organically over the course of

the various discussions, as it was not addressed with the initial research questions.

Increasing Student Engagement

The overwhelming desire for more student engagement was woven throughout the minds

and hearts of the participants within the focus group and interview discussions. It was also the

center of the conversation during the site observations. The definition of student engagement

depends on the context and the desired outcomes. Engagement is defined as strong relationships

between students, teachers, families, and schools, and strong connections between schools and

the broader community (Stefanski et al., 2016). Stakeholders within CCPS defined it as their

student's active participation and consistent use of the Community Den. It has become evident to

the CCPS educational community that students are not fully engaged or utilizing the Den to

address their individual needs. During the initial site observation, a current school employee expressed, "that the staff would like to explore ways to increase awareness and access of the Den for students (e.g., social media, google form for appts., Class Dojo). Students were the original target consumer of the Den." The Community Den served to close the gap for high school students in particular. During the focus group, a volunteer donor shared, "I thought that would be a good way for us to get involved with the older kids because we were doing the tiger packs, the weekend feeding program with the elementary school". They additionally reflected:

> Just remember, in high school days, it's not easy to ask somebody for help, or you don't
>
> even want anybody to know that you need help, especially when there are food
>
> deficiencies. So, I wanted the kids to have a way to be able to come in and get things.

These voices speak to the vital elements of establishing, nurturing, and maintaining consistent opportunities for students to be meaningfully involved in all facets of the Community Den. It is the driving force behind the heart work that is being done daily by the stakeholders of the Den.

Making the Case for the Community Den

In order for students to be actively engaged, they must feel welcomed and not burdened by their need for help. Students are often told to seek help and guidance from trusted adults; however, if there's a perceived stigma attached, they will not be vulnerable enough to ask. As a current school employee noted "I think there were at times perceptions from the community that this was not something that the school should be providing" Furthermore, former school employee shared that a community member remarked, "The purpose of the school is to teach and educate" This may speak to the underlying feelings of some key stakeholder within the community at large. As evident in the following statement highlighted by a former school employee, "You are in charge of educating people, not feeding them. You are in charge of their

brains, not their stomachs". Additionally, they expressed that the statement evoked the following emotional response:

> We have to help the whole child, the whole family, the whole community…When all that
> comes together, then our kids can learn…They have to have clean clothes in order to
> learn their math because otherwise they feel uncomfortable.

As another current school employee explained, " They are unable to see the connection between empty bellies, being cold, and no hygiene products, as keeping learning from happening" A lack of basic resources directly affects the long term outcomes and educational trajectory of students across developmental levels (Ferguson et al., 2007). The voices of the community at large have the power to shift the perception within the minds of students who may need support from the Community Den. Thus, strengthening their ability to feel safe when seeking help and their desire to become engaged and supportive members of the Den.

Addressing Volunteer and Staffing Challenges During a Pandemic

Engaging and building a volunteer community within a rural environment has unique challenges (Oncescu & Giles, 2013); however, the unprecedented climate adds to the difficult nature of securing consistent support among the community. This was an identified concern across the focus groups, interviews, and site observation discussion. The participants recognize the inherent struggle of balancing their daily job-related tasks with the daily operational needs of the Community Den. During the focus group session a current school employee noted:

> It's very hard as a school staff, especially right now with the current educational climate,
> to ask anyone for anything extra. Especially when it comes to hours or time or
> volunteering, like that is the biggest barrier that we all had when we were actively
> working.

They explained further, "It did tend to be us. That made it a little difficult at times because we all have jobs. That really took up a lot of our time." Current school employees highlighted the lack of staff time and availability to secure additional resources by stating, "Their day is already filled beyond capacity with things. So, I'm sure they don't have the time either, to necessarily do a whole lot of research to find other resources." Each of these concerns illustrate the struggles faced by educators daily across most school divisions. However, it all seems to pale in comparison to the additional challenges being addressed as the result of the pandemic's effect on community resources. During the site visit a current school employee stressed the impact of COVID protocols on the ability to utilize volunteers by sharing, "Well, I think until we kind of get past all the COVID protocols, you know, we could set something in place, but we're really not allowing folks to come in, per se volunteers" The same employee shared in greater detailed during the focus group:

> Not being able to really have a strong volunteer program where people can come in and help due to COVID restrictions. These restrictions affect a lot of the things that we do, but certainly, I'm sure that's been a challenge for the Community Den and just know, you have a group of volunteers who are willing and able to help run the program.

While the lasting impact of the pandemic on the Community Den's daily operations is unknown, building a system to sustain the availability of the den to the school community is vital. Students may be seen as a consistent resource, and it offers opportunities that can enhance learning experiences. Throughout the sessions, participants also shared possible ways to enhance volunteer engagement and participation by utilizing students as a resource to support the Community Den's daily operations. A current school employee noted, "I'm sure there could be students that could be a part of the den somehow, whether it's utilizing the volunteer hours that

are required for them for graduation or doing some sort of mock internship in the den." During the site observation, another school employee shared that students for the National Honor Society had volunteered in the Den. During the focus group, a participant highlighted the benefits of partnering with the exceptional education staff to create opportunities for community experiences for students. Another current school employee proclaimed, "We've got some student groups that could take advantage of that. And it'd be a win-win situation. Perfect!" Additionally, they shared, "That students could be our volunteers that they come in, volunteer, help us put clothes away." Empowering students with a sense of community and belonging builds trust (Bindreiff, 2020). Thus, allowing them to see how they can contribute to the community as a whole, while also being comfortable enough to ask for and receive help when needed.

Optimizing the Physical Space

Another theme that emerged from data collection was the need for increased accessibility and optimization of the physical space for the Community Den. While the focus group protocol did not contain a specific question addressing accessibility and space, this theme appeared in all focus group and interview conversations. The conversation regarding space began with one focus group participant noting how the Den began in a cabinet with snacks for students. Through visits and observations, the capstone team was able to see the expansion of the Den to the current room. A former school employee shared:

> A previous leader identified a room in the school that we were able to use, and we kind of moved everything out of my closet into the room at the school and put it out there we connected with our faith-based community.

The move to a larger space expanded the physical space of the Den and the opportunity to seek donations and contributions. Community members heard the call for donations and rose to the occasion. One former school employee shared:

> And we were given a lot of clothing donations. But along with that, we also got cabinets; we got clothing racks, the if you've been there, you saw the couches, we got somebody brought the couches in because part of my vision for that space was not just come and get stuff. It was to be a community space where you could come in, and you know, if you needed to sit and chat, we also were hoping to look forward to doing things like maybe some programming, workshops, that sort of thing. So that's kind of how the space developed.

While the increase of space has been good for the Den, the current space also hinders the number of donations that can be accepted and the items that can be purchased. In reviewing documents, supplies have been purchased in bulk, but the lack of space presents an issue with the storage and organization of items.

Some of the focus group participants liked the idea of having the couches and large clothing racks in the Den. Other focus group participants shared a different point of view. A current school employee asked, "Do people use the furniture that's in there-the couches, etcetera? Or is that something that could be removed to make more room?" The consensus from several participants was that the couches might need to be removed from the Den to make more space and for the organization of items and supplies.

Upon arrival at the Den, the space was visibly cluttered. Clothing took over a major portion of the space and racks of clothing needed to be moved to the hallway to create space to

maneuver around the Den. The overwhelming feeling from participants was that a refresh of the space is needed. A current employee suggested, "You know, cleaner, neat, like more modern-ish, don't take offense there's nothing wrong with the current state of the den but a fresh, a fresh look…." Another current employee followed up by saying, "I think some shelving spaces, maybe like, you know, just like some bookcases, well, not bookcases, but just storage. Things for like the shoes, wall hangers for the clothes, things like that and make it a little more accessible." A current school employee also shared, "I think the rolling carts would be great too, for out in the hallway, when we do open it up. And then we can close the double doors like they did before." Closing the doors to the hallway creates additional space without expanding to another classroom which was a concern from one of the interviewees.

The consensus from interviews, observations, and the document review shows the need for a change in space for the Community Den. Overall, the data shows organization, better utilization of the room, and increased space would enhance the overall experience of patrons to the Den, allow for additional services to be offered, and aid in efficiency for the inventory of resources.

Accessibility to the Den

When considering the space of the Community Den, the accessibility to the space came up in the discussion. The Den is located in the back of the school, where the closest entrance and exit require patrons to utilize steep steps. A current school employee shared:

> I'm just worried about the location, you know, some people are afraid, not afraid.
> But you know, they're like, Well, I don't want everyone to see me when I'm
> coming in here. And they have set it up to where they come in through the back

part of our building, they get to drive around, which I think is awesome. But we

do have some pretty high steps back there too, which makes it hard for the elderly.

I worry about that a little bit. That as far as the location of where we have our

Den. But I don't know where else we could put it.

The capstone team also noted the concern of this participant during a site visit. Once two elderly

ladies finished collecting their items, they needed assistance getting to their car. It was

challenging for the ladies to tote bags of clothing and cleaning supplies down the steep steps to

the parking lot.

Across interviews and focus groups, the need for signage and flyers for the Den was

mentioned. Upon arrival at the Den, there are no signs to direct patrons to the location. The

capstone team noticed the concern during a site visit. An interviewee who is a current school

employee mentioned that professional signs near the road entrance would be an asset to help

advertise the Den and help patrons and those donating locate the space. It was further mentioned

that once individuals are on school property, there is no indication that the entrance to the Den is

in the back of the school.

During a site visit, it was noted that only four patrons visited the Den during the time of

the visit. The Den opened to patrons at 1:00 in the afternoon and was staffed by two school

employees. In an interview with a participant, the hours of operation for the Den were an area of

concern. It was offered that working parents who need items may not be able to come during the

school day. There was also a concern with the time of the day that students are able to access

items from the Den. A current school employee voiced, " …I know right now we have it open

once a month. So that could be an issue in terms of if I'm not available on that one day, I can't go

to the Den. The thought around opening the Den more often was mentioned in several

conversations, along with the concerns about staffing the additional dates and times.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

In response to the initial RFA and ongoing conversations with the team at CCPS, the capstone team set out to learn as much as we could regarding the Community Den's origins and history, access to resources, and what strategies and practices existed that could help ensure its continued success. This would, in turn, allow us to offer a blueprint that would help ensure its ongoing success. We set out to accomplish this through several site visits, structured interviews, focus groups with CCPS staff and administrators, Community Den patrons and donors, and Charles City community members.

The capstone team quickly understood that the Den is an initiative with a profound impact and considerable untapped potential. Our research established a clear need for additional community resources and supported why the school district was the perfect home for such a place. We also found that there was considerable passion around the work that the Den has done to date. However, there is considerable room for growth and evolution to help it fulfill the scope of its intended mission. Based on the information we received related to our original research questions through input from those closest to the Community Den, an exploration of national best practices, and our analysis of the data collected, we offer a series of recommendations laid out in Table 3 and discussed at length below. Based on relevant literature, document analysis, interviews, and focus groups, the following recommendations were created as initial steps to improve the overall operations of the Community Den.

Table 3

Recommendations for the Community Den

Category	**Recommendations**
1. Improving opportunities for student engagement	a. Using technology and social media to enhance connection. b. Offering accumulation of graduation community service hours. c. Partnering with the Exceptional Education Department for a vocational learning option.
2. Improving community marketing and outreach efforts	a . Enlisting students to develop a marketing plan for the Den. b. Incorporating asset mapping to identify resources that benefit the school and community.
3. Increasing Opportunities for Community Engagement Through Volunteerism	a. Outlining a volunteer recruitment plan. b. Developing an orientation process. c. Creating communication loops targeting guidance, feedback, and improvement.
4. Improvements to Data Tracking, Management, and Utilization	a. Tracking den utilization and patron information b. Tracking donations and donor information c. Tracking inventory and managing the flow of items
5. Improving the physical space	a. Reimagine the physical space b. Organizing Inventory c. Improving accessibility d. Identifying additional space

Recommendation 1: Improving Opportunities for Student Engagement

The desire to build opportunities for active student engagement emerged at the forefront across the focus groups, interviews, and site observation discussion. Participants noted that not only were the students not utilizing the Den, when given an opportunity they showed little to no

interest in participating or supporting the Den's operations. Furthermore, the participants recognize the importance of bridging school and community partnerships in an effort to enhance various options of student engagement that had gone untapped until the guided research questions brought to the surface like-minded goals that would positively impact students. As indicated by Toth (2021), using student-driven engagement strategies is more effective because it encourages students to rely on their peers for resources as they build strong social bonds with one another. Likewise, strong school-community partnerships play an essential role in successful schools, often providing support and resources to meet staff, family, and student needs that go beyond what is typically available through school (Gross et al., 2015). The following section targets recommendations that are responsive to the focus group data, the review of documents shared by CCPS, and the literature review as it relates to best practices.

Giving all students an opportunity to be engaged in an aspect of the Community Den will remove perceived stigmas while empowering them to build skills and advocate for themselves and each other. The recommendations for direct student engagement center around the following three key areas: technology, community service hours for graduation, and developing a partnership with the Exceptional Education Department.

1. Utilizing technology to engage students via social media will keep them informed regarding the support offered within the Community Den. An alternative option would be to create a Class Dojo that's dedicated to the Den for students that do not have access to social media or the internet outside of the school building, coupled with incorporating a Google form to allow students to make appointments to visit the Den.

2. Given the opportunity CCPS students can accumulate community service hours towards graduation by volunteering during school hours when the Community Den is closed, by

stocking, inventory control, updating the social media accounts, and any additional

needed task to support operations.

3. Developing a partnership with the Exceptional Education Department team to offer

enhanced learning opportunities to students that will support goals and objectives

outlined within their Individual Education Plans (IEP).

Implementation across these three recommendations create opportunities for all students

within the Charles City County Public School community to become actively and meaningfully

engaged while utilizing and supporting the Community Den.

Recommendation 2: Improving Community Marketing and Outreach Efforts

The following section speaks to targeted areas for increased marketing, student, school,

and community collaboration. The information gathered offers insight on how to incorporate

opportunities for student engagement and community partnership efforts using the following

approach:

1. Enlisting students to develop a marketing plan for the Community Den

2. Incorporating Asset Mapping to improve relationships with local businesses and

faith-based groups to identify resources that benefit the school and community

Enlisting students to develop a marketing plan for the Den

Students can become more active, engaged participants in the Den if provided the proper

structure, autonomy, and space for students to self-track their learning progress through an

immersive experience that focuses on the target area of increasing student buy-in and

engagement with the Community Den. Best practices affirm that students quickly become adept

at personalizing the learning to one another's needs when they are the drivers of the process

(Sickler, (2019). This type of service learning prompts young minds to get involved in social

action initiatives and give back to their school and or community. For example, partnering with the marketing teacher to enlist the marketing students to develop flyers, support the social media aspects of the Den on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter with their peers and the Charles City community. The indicated approach can also benefit the school community overall for the reason that it equips students to act as well-rounded, higher-level, critical thinkers that make for savvier professionals no matter the industry. Incorporating the student voice in the marketing modality allows the opportunity for students to examine and engage in the intricacies of design, promotion, and branding (Brennan, 2013).

Tapping into these intricacies can aid in developing the useful skill of creative and critical thinking skills needed to make effective decisions. Not to mention those in the marketing field are often tasked with understanding customer experiences and expected to know how to communicate with diverse audiences (Kaye, 2003). In other words, marketing imparts communication tactics that are useful in dealing with different groups of people. Fundamentally, understanding how to communicate with different people is invaluable in the workplace. These social development and communication skills can help students learn how to communicate, effectively through sharing pertinent Community Den resources and updates with school staff, students, and the Charles City community. Ultimately, this targeted approach of using students to reach their peers could lead to more students viewing the Den as a useful asset for the reason that the students themselves are marketing and publicizing the Den as a resource to their peers.

Asset Mapping to Improve Relationships with Local Businesses and Faith-Based Groups to Identify Resources that Benefit the School and Community

Many interviewees believe the community den is well-positioned to receive significant community support and/or grant funding designed to provide educational assistance to students.

Based on this perspective, the capstone team conducted an abbreviated version of asset mapping to establish possible school-community partnerships opportunities, because embedded in this approach are opportunities for school teams to engage in activities consistent with leadership, advocacy, and collaboration. While the initial list of community assets such as New Hope Panty, Free Libraries and Matthew Havens identified from the document analysis, focus groups, and interviews outlined in our findings section are preliminary they serve as examples of supports that remove barriers to student success. It is recommended the Community Den's coordinators continue with the ongoing process of adding additional resources, services, and programs to the initial list. This progressive list of available resources can be turned into a comprehensive directory of resources that benefit the school and community. The capstone team recommends CCPS explore a partnership with national organizations such as Communities in Schools and the YMCA. Tapping into these national resources allows CCPS and the Community Den to have access to national and state resources and programming that meets the needs of students and the community as a whole. As mentioned, resources and support are essential components to supporting the needs of students and school communities. Often when school leaders are pursuing funds for resources outside of traditional instructional resources, they tend to seek donations from private or corporate sponsors or community-based organizations (Zimmer & Krop, 2003). Schools often rely on community partnerships to support the needs of students and families (Castro, 2016). When schools can tap into resources such as faith-based organizations, food banks, and medical services, they can eliminate barriers and challenges students may face.

Using better collaborations that incorporate existing programs and resources within Charles City can be key in meeting the outcomes of the Community Den's strategic plan. The goal of addressing student needs both inside and out of the classroom and meeting the needs of

the Charles City community was the driving force behind the creation of the Community Den. Bridging the student involvement with the community aspect of connecting with community partnerships leaves the opportunity for the students to have more direct connections with the Charles City Community creating a better sense of community for all individuals involved.

Recommendation 3: Increasing Opportunities for Community Engagement Through Volunteerism

The unique challenges faced by a rural school division like Charles City County Public Schools when attempting to recruit, train, and maintain a cadre of community volunteers became apparent throughout the focus groups, interviews, and site observation discussion. The following are key findings identified by participants that impact their ability to create and sustain a volunteer pool to support the Community Den: 1. volunteer training is limited in its scope and sequence; 2. a formal process is needed for vetting, securing, and maintaining volunteers; and 3. Covid restrictions/protocols have impacted community members' onsite operational support.

Shrestha & Cihlar (2004) indicated it is vital to recognize the rural conditions affecting volunteer engagement, thus they suggest the need for a strategic and intentional approach to volunteer recruitment, training, and sustainability. The following section outlines recommendations to increase opportunities for community engagement through volunteerism that will support operational aspects of the Community Den. These steps coincide with the recommendations from the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2005) for volunteer recruitment, training, and management practices.

Utilizing the findings from the aforementioned asset mapping process and after reviewing the current policy within the school division for volunteer participation the CCPS administrative team and stakeholders will incorporate the following steps in the overall action plan/blueprint under securing additional community involvement.

1. Outline a volunteer recruitment plan that defines the desired skill set and screening process.

2. Develop a three-step orientation process including an identified trainer, manual with support materials, and designated training schedule for volunteers.

3. Develop and incorporate communication loops for guidance, feedback, and ongoing continuous improvement opportunities.

This three-step process will also support volunteer opportunities for student engagement within the Community Den. When partnering student engagement with increased volunteerism, the work of Dr. Steve Constantino (2021) can serve as an initial reference for the CCPS stakeholders considering new ways to enhance family engagement and partnerships. Given the opportunity to build capacity by utilizing both community members and students will further bridge the community partnerships while creating a pipeline for sustainable human capital and resources to support the overall operations of the Community Den.

Recommendation 4: Improvements to Data Tracking, Management, and Utilization

One of our primary areas of focus was on exploring existing best practices that would improve the overall operations of the Community Den. During our initial conversations with the CCPS team and in our focus groups and interviews, we learned quickly that there were little to no efforts being allocated towards establishing a consistent method of collecting or managing data. Due largely to a lack of time and resources to focus on this area, records were minimal and, when available, inconsistent and incomplete. Through these conversations with the individuals who operate the Community Den and CCPS administration, as well as our review of available and relevant literature (Thompson et al., 2019), it became clear that improving upon existing data management practices would be essential to help the Community Den's long-term sustainability

and strategic growth. Based on models utilized by nationally recognized community support

agencies (Boys & Girls, 2017) and with a realistic understanding of the capacity for existing staff

or future community members or student volunteers to focus on improvements in this area, there

are three specific areas we believe would be most impactful. These include more robust and

standardized methods for tracking:

1. Utilization of the Community Den and patron information

2. Incoming donations and information about the donors

3. Inventory and managing the flow of items

This section offers several suggestions and resources to initiate or improve upon existing

practices.

Tracking Utilization and Patron Information

Our initial review of the documents provided by the CCPS team gave us considerable

insight into their data collection and management methods. Chapter 4 detailed the scope of these

efforts and insights into the inconsistencies and gaps that currently exist in practices. There was

also an acknowledgment that this was an area that could be improved upon and how beneficial

the insights better data management could be to their overall operations. The first area that could

use improvement is in how patron information is collected and maintained. Rather than asking

patrons to write just their name on a slip of loose-leaf paper, this is an untapped opportunity to

collect useful information about who is using the Community Den. A well-designed spreadsheet

could be created using a basic computing program, such as Microsoft Excel (spreadsheet to be

provided as part of our final Blueprint). As patrons visit the Den, staff or volunteers could ask

them for and then input some basic information. However, this could also be accomplished

through less technical methods using a standardized sign-in sheet (See Appendix E) and entered

later. In either case, staff should be ready to assist any patrons who require support due to issues with literacy, writing ability, accessibility, etc.

With this information in hand, the Community Den could improve upon its existing practices through more informed utilization records. A spreadsheet with this information would produce several informative data points including the total number of visitors per month, total unique visitors, how frequently repeat patrons visit the Den, utilization trends over the year, and how patrons are affiliated with the Den (student, employee, community member). With this information at their disposal, Community Den staff could make important decisions about when to seek additional donations and resources, volunteer needs, and guide outreach efforts to better connect with underserved populations.

In addition to collecting information on who is visiting the Community Den, there is another missed data opportunity that could help the initiative become even more effective in how it supports the community. By adding a column to the sign-in sheet/spreadsheet that asks about the types of items that patrons would like to request, the team can begin to curate the resources they procure to ensure that they are optimizing their ability to fill unmet needs. For example, during our initial site visit, one community member shared that she is excited when they have cleaning products available, particularly bleach. Another shared during a focus group that childcare products, such as diapers or baby clothes, were an invaluable resource. By collecting this information from each individual that visits the Den, staff can chart out specific areas of needs as they evolve over time.

Tracking Donations and Donor Information

Nearly all of the resources available through the Community Den come in the form of donations. Many of these are from CCPS staff and families, community members, and local

church groups. As one of the researchers discovered when they dropped off a donation of clothes and some personal hygiene items with front office staff, there is no system for tracking where donations come from. This is another missed opportunity for the Community Den to improve relationships with donors through collecting some basic data points. By asking donors to provide some basic information when they make donations, whether monetary or goods, the Den can begin to cultivate stronger relationships with those whose contributions sustain the initiative. This could include their name or the name of their organization, contact information, what goods, products, or financial contribution they donated, and a question about whether they are open to being placed on a donor email list that will be used if and when the Community Den was in need of certain types of assistance (See Appendix F).

Access to the information on this form serves several purposes. First, it ensures that staff has a full understanding of where their donations are coming from. This information can be easily tracked by having volunteers, ideally, students, input the information into a donor database (Excel spreadsheet to be provided as part of our final Blueprint). This opens up the opportunity for the staff or even potential student volunteers to reach out to follow-up with a personalized thank you, whether by email or phone. Such outreach would help foster improved relationships and potentially increase the likelihood of future donations. It also offers the opportunity for the Community Den to develop a donor email list that can be used to share information and updates about the initiative, requests for volunteers, and "wish list" information when specific resources are in short supply. Doing so would help foster more direct connections between community members.

Tracking Inventory and Managing the Flow of Items

Another area that emerged as being a missed opportunity to gather information was the

Community Den's ability to track inventory or, more specifically, manage and understand the flow of items. Given the overall volume of annual donations, we don't believe it would be the best use of time to track every individual item that goes in and out of the Den's doors. However, there is a benefit to tracking when certain types of items are running low.

We learned that staff take monthly or bi-monthly shopping trips to use what limited funds they have to purchase both requested items and ones that are running low. A routine scan of each major area (clothes (men's, women's, children's, summer, winter, etc.), cleaning supplies, school supplies, and food), at the beginning and end of each day the Community Den is open, could provide information about what is most commonly needed. Additionally, by monitoring which areas are running low, staff could regularly reach out to their donor list to share specific types of items that may be in need before there are critical shortages.

Recommendation 5: Improving the Physical Space

When planning for the next chapter of the Community Den the physical space plays a vital role in the enhancements and growth of the Den. Functionality, appearance, and accessibility are key to the experience of patrons and to volunteers who are needed to ensure sustainability. Data collected from focus groups, interviews, and site visits all suggest that improvements to the physical space of the Community Den can potentially increase the use of the Den by students and other community users. Recommendations for improving the physical space of the Community Den include:

1. Reimagining the physical space

2. Organizing Inventory

3. Improving accessibility

4. Identifying additional space

Reimagining the Physical Space

At first sight when visiting the Community Den, it appears to be cluttered, unorganized, and dated. These characteristics do not illustrate the hard work and dedication that go into making the Den the community asset that it is. When looking to reimagine the physical space delineated spaces will be needed for products and services offered by the Den. These spaces can be established with signage, hanging racks, shelving for folded clothes items and non-perishable food items and space dividers to create needed sections. The physical space for the Den can be transformed into a prideful store for students and patrons to utilize, by soliciting the help of community volunteers and marketing students to redesign and organize the space. The work of reimagining the space removes unneeded items from the Den and reduces the amount of clutter to create a clean look that is appealing to all stakeholders.

Organizing Inventory

To better help the patrons of the Den, inventory should be organized in a systematic way. Items should be placed in categories such as clothing, food, household, and toiletries. When possible, clear areas should be created in the Den to display items within the designated categories with appropriate printed visible eye-appealing signage. Items should be displayed on racks, shelves, and within bins in an appropriate, but in an accessible manner. Inventory should be labeled and monitored frequently to determine usage and need.

Improving Accessibility

Improving the accessibility to the community Den helps those donating to the Den and can also help the patrons of the Den. The current physical location of the Den is in the back of the building near a set of steep stairs. This particular entryway closest to the Den is not handicap accessible. This entrance is also not convenient for those delivering multiple heavy items and supplies to the Den. To improve accessibility, it is imperative to create drop hours outside of regular school hours for individuals to access the Den and to drop off supplies. Visibility comes alongside accessibility and requires individuals to have professionally made signs displaying the name of the Den and hours of operation.

Identifying additional space

Space within school buildings is often hard to come by due to the many instructional programs that schools operate. While an ideal recommendation for the Community Den would consist of an additional room for the expansion of the Den and its offerings, that may not be a reality at this time. To support the future growth of the Den, it is highly recommended to identify additional space that can be used to house surplus items. When donations are received, having a receiving area where items can be placed until they are ready to put on display will help in providing the Den with a cleaner look. This area can be a shared space, but it needs to be a space accessible to staff and volunteers.

The team sought to incorporate the information related to the original research questions through input from those closest to the Community Den, an exploration of national best practices, and our analysis of the data collected. We offered a series of recommendations based on relevant literature, document analysis, a modified asset mapping process, interviews, and

focus groups. The recommendations to support increasing opportunities for student engagement, marketing outreach, community engagement, improvements for data management, and physical spacing were formatted as initial steps within the blueprint to improve the overall operations of the Community Den.

Conclusion

Charles City has a rich history dating back generations. Residents have developed a close-knit, supportive, and deeply connected sense of community. At the heart of this community is the Charles City Public School district. The residents of Charles City County, like many small rural communities across America, also confront some significant social challenges. These include higher poverty rates and food insecurity, particularly among school-aged children and adolescents, than neighboring suburban or urban communities, limited access to grocery stores (food deserts), and disproportionately high unemployment rates. The role CCPS has come to play in providing resources has become increasingly essential to meeting the complex and most urgent needs of their community, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our capstone team received the initial Request for Assistance to offer a sustainable path forward for the Community Den in June 2021. We immediately recognized the unrealized and untapped potential in the resource and were eager to offer our expertise and efforts to create a blueprint that would optimize the operations and resources of the Den in a way that could sustain it well into the future.

As we sought to answer our initial research questions around understanding the history of and context for the Community Den, what resources were available to support its operations, and what models and best practices could inform its practices, we began to develop an understanding of what a labor of love this initiative was for all involved. This was not just a practical resource, but one that tapped into the emotional core of a close-knit and under-resourced rural community. Since its inception, the Den had become a lifeline for many Charles City community members, not just those affiliated with the school district. Through a series of site visits, informal conversations with CCPS staff, focus groups and interviews with stakeholders, a comprehensive

review of existing literature, and our abbreviated asset mapping process, we learned a great deal about the many opportunities and challenges the Den faced. Several standout themes emerged, including the need to improve access to resources, prioritizing connections with the community, a focus on increasing student engagement, and an immediate need to refresh and optimize the physical space. These themes served as the basis for our recommendations, which informed the blueprint we provided to the CCPS team.

Ultimately, it was clear that the heart of the Community Den was not the donations, funding sources, physical space, or any other tangible resources at its disposal. The Community Den was an initiative founded with a mission that keeps community and people at its core. It is a passion project for the people who oversee its operations, a source of kindness and support for the patrons who benefit from its existence, and a place for donors to make a disproportionately large impact with their contributions. For our capstone team, responding to the initial Request for Assistance served as an opportunity for us to bring our own passions, interests, experiences, and skills to bear in a way that went far beyond a doctoral project. We grew committed to the short- and long-term success and sustainability of the Community Den. As we conclude this capstone process, we take great pride in the blueprint we hand off to the CCPS team, knowing that each of our recommendations and tools will help serve their mission and positively impact the lives of their community members.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Site Visit Log

Date	Time	Location/Setting	Activity	Notes/Comments (What is going on, who did you interact with, is it a holiday, etc.)

Appendix B. Focus Group Protocols

Focus Group Script: Administrators

Intro: Thank you all for joining us today. As we have already shared, the purpose of our study is to offer Charles City Public Schools (CCPS) an evidence-based perspective and blueprint that will help the district meet the intended vision and mission of the Community Den, to provide resources and assistance to our students to help reduce the barriers to education, and make it a sustainable resource. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Just be honest. If you wish, you can also respond to each other's comments, like you would in an ordinary conversation. It is my job to make sure that everyone here gets to participate and that we stay on track. _____ is here to record and summarize your comments. We'll be here for 60-90 minutes.

Before we get started, I want to let you know two things. First, the information we learn today will be compiled into a final report. That report will include a summary of your comments and some recommendations. It will be shared with our client, Charles City, our capstone chair, and the two members of the capstone team. Secondly, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. This focus group today is confidential. We will not be using your names and you will not be identified as an individual in our report of this study. We ask that anything shared in this discussion today is not be repeated outside of this call.
As you can see, we will be recording this focus group. The recording will only be used to make sure our notes are correct and will not be heard by anyone outside of this project.
Let's begin with introductions.

Opening Question: Please share with us your name and your role with your school/area/district.
Opening Question: Please share with us your name and your current professional role, as well as your role when you were working with The Community Den.

RQ 1: The first area we will focus on today involves looking at history and context for the Community Den.

1. Can you tell me why the Community Den was created?
2. What factors have contributed to the success of the Community Den?
3. What are some challenges the Community Den has faced?
4. In your experience, what members of the community frequently utilize the Community Den?

RQ 2: We are going to shift to a new topic now. I would like to discuss what resources are available to support and sustain the Community Den.

1. What are some of the local, state, and federal resources that have been or are currently being used to support the Community Den and how are they secured?

2. Given your experiences with the Community Den, do you believe there are any untapped resources that would help it grow? (national organizations, human resources, financial resources, etc.)
3. What are some of the limitations that have impacted the Community Den's access to resources?
4. How has the Community Den recruited and trained volunteers?

RQ 3: Our last topic today will focus on your thoughts around best practices to improve the overall operations of the Community Den,

1. Are there certain data points that the Community Den could collect which would help CCPS better support this operation?
2. Do you have any ideas on how to make the Community Den better?

Closing Question

To wrap things up for today
1. Is there anything we didn't touch on that you feel is important to share?

Focus Group Script: Volunteers/Community Support/Resource Partners

Intro: Thank you all for joining us today. As we have already shared, the purpose of our study is to offer Charles City Public Schools (CCPS) an evidence-based perspective and blueprint that will help the district meet the intended vision and mission of the Community Den, to provide resources and assistance to our students to help reduce the barriers to education, and make it a sustainable resource. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Just be honest. If you wish, you can also respond to each other's comments, like you would in an ordinary conversation. It is my job to make sure that everyone here gets to participate and that we stay on track. _____ is here to record and summarize your comments. We'll be here for 60-90 minutes.

Before we get started, I want to let you know two things. First, the information we learn today will be compiled into a final report. That report will include a summary of your comments and some recommendations. It will be shared with our client, Charles City, our capstone chair, and the two members of the capstone team. Secondly, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. This focus group today is confidential. We will not be using your names and you will not be identified as an individual in our report of this study. We ask that anything shared in this discussion today is not repeated outside of this call. We will be recording this focus group. The recording will only be used to make sure our notes are correct and will not be heard by anyone outside of this project.

Let's begin with introductions.

Opening Question: Please share with us your name and your role with your school/area/district.

RQ 1: The first area we will focus on today involves looking at history and context for the Community Den.

1. Can you tell me why the Community Den was created?
2. Why is the Community Den important to Charles City community members?
3. What factors have contributed to the success of the Community Den?
4. What are some challenges the Community Den has faced?
5. In your experience, what members of the community frequently utilize the Community Den?

RQ 2: We are going to shift to a new topic now. I would like to discuss what resources are available to support and sustain the Community Den.

1. What are some of the local resources that have been or are currently being used to support the Community Den and how are they secured?
2. Given your experiences with The Community Den, do you believe there are any untapped resources that would help it grow? (national organizations, human resources, financial resources, etc.)

3. What are some of the limitations that have impacted The Community Den's access to resources?
4. How has The Community Den recruited and trained volunteers?

RQ 3: Our last topic today will focus on your thoughts around best practices to improve the overall operations of the Community Den.

1. What information would be useful to help your continued support of the Community Den?
2. How would you improve the Community Den?

Closing Question

To wrap things up for today
1. Is there anything we didn't touch on that you feel is important to share?

Focus Group Script: Community Members (Users)

Intro: Thank you all for joining us today. As we have already shared, the purpose of our study is to offer Charles City Public Schools (CCPS) an evidence-based perspective and blueprint that will help the district meet the intended vision and mission of the Community Den, to provide resources and assistance to our students to help reduce the barriers to education, and make it a sustainable resource. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Just be honest. If you wish, you can also respond to each other's comments, like you would in an ordinary conversation. It is my job to make sure that everyone here gets to participate and that we stay on track. _____ is here to record and summarize your comments. We'll be here for 60-90 minutes.

Before we get started, I want to let you know two things. First, the information we learn today will be compiled into a final report. That report will include a summary of your comments and some recommendations. It will be shared with our client, Charles City, our capstone chair, and the two members of the capstone team. Secondly, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. This focus group today is confidential. We will not be using your names and you will not be identified as an individual in our report of this study. We ask that anything shared in this discussion today is not repeated outside of this call. We will be recording this focus group. The recording will only be used to make sure our notes are correct and will not be heard by anyone outside of this project.
Let's begin with introductions.

Opening Question: Please share with us your name and how long you have been using the Community Den.

RQ 1: The first area we will focus on today involves looking at your history and experience with the Community Den. We have come to understand that the Community Den was created to provide additional resources to members of the Charles City Community.

1. What has the Community Den done that has been most beneficial?
2. We have found that people use the Community Den for many different reasons. Can you share what originally brought you to the Community Den?

RQ 2: We are going to shift to a new topic now. I would like to discuss how you use the resources of the Community Den.

1. What other resources would you like to see provided by the Community Den?
2. Are you aware of any resources or organizations in the community that are similar to the Community Den?
3. Is there anything that has prevented you from using the Community Den in the past?

RQ 3: Our last topic today will focus on your thoughts around ways to improve the overall operations of the Community Den.

1. Do you have any ideas on how to make the Community Den better?

Closing Question

To wrap things up for today
1. Is there anything we didn't touch on that you feel is important to share?

Appendix C. Asset Mapping Outline

Asset Mapping is the process of identifying and providing information about a community's resources. Essentially, asset mapping focuses on creating a toolkit of resources of a particular community. The terms Asset mapping, Community mapping or Participatory mapping are sometimes used interchangeably. The capstone team conducted a modified version of asset mapping to provide the client an outline of the process should they decide to engage in community mapping themselves. The steps are outlined and described below:

1. Develop a multidisciplinary team.
2. Examine and assess a current list of identified resources, services, and programs, and identify new ones.
3. Contact individual and community resources.
4. Develop and maintain a community resource guide, and map.

Four-Step Approach for Creating a Community Asset Map

Develop a Multidisciplinary Team.

Counselors normally serve as the asset mapping coordinator due to the scope of their work focusing on referral services. The counselor should use their leadership ability to create a multidisciplinary team of school and community stakeholders to develop, implement, and maintain the community asset map (Griffin & Farris 2010). The model recommends this core group to serve as the advisory council. Team members can be teachers, school social workers, school psychologists, those in community and mental health, parents, community members, or anyone who vested an interest in the success of students. Members of the team must be multiculturally competent to successfully address the needs of racially diverse student populations. These members should be well versed in Diversity Equity and Inclusion work (DEI). DEI refers to an understanding that differences in racial identity impact access to opportunity and successful outcomes for individuals and groups.

Examine and Assess a Current List of Identified Resources, Services, and Programs, and Identify New Ones.

Once the team has been assembled, the next step in community mapping is examining and assessing current resources, brainstorming potential future resources, and contacting resources (Griffin & Farris 2010). This list should include resources both within and outside the school, and note what services the resources provided for students and or families and all costs. The list may include resources such as food, churches, learning resources, childcare services, technology services, clubs, organizations, churches, community centers, banks, small businesses, etc. The resource list is a fluid document and will continue to be updated by members of the multidisciplinary team.

Contact Individual and Community Resources.

The third step in community mapping is contacting the list of resources created by the team. Divide the list among the team and contact the possible resources to get the most recent information on the services they provide, the goals and activities of their program, costs of services, current hours of operations, location, contact numbers, and how they can be of benefit

to the school community. The resources should be visited to explore any potential barriers that may be faced by students and families as they access the services. Multiple methods should be used to contact resources to ensure accuracy, face to face conversations, email communication, and a phone or conference call can be used to make initial contact with resources.

Develop and maintain a community resource guide, and map.

The last step is to create a resource tool kit or inventory of all available resources and contacts in a user-friendly easily accessible guide. This final step is an important part of community asset mapping as the map provides a comprehensive list of resources and their location. Google maps can be used to achieve this last step.

Appendix D. Asset Mapping Brief Overview

Asset Mapping Brief Overview

Asset Mapping is the process of identifying and providing information about a community's resources. Essentially, asset mapping focuses on creating a toolkit of resources of a particular community. The terms Asset mapping, Community mapping or Participatory mapping are sometimes used interchangeably.

An Asset is a status, condition, behavior, knowledge, or skill that a person, group, or entity possesses which serves as support or resource, or strength to oneself and others in the community (Building Movement Project, n.d.).

Examples of Assets

| Associations	Physical Space/Structure	Economic/Political Resources
● PTA ● Non Profit organizations	● Park ● Garden ● Campsite ● Picnic Area	● Local Business ● Banks ● Credit Unions
Institutions	Individuals	*"Assets are anything that improves the quality of a community's life"*
● Schools ● Universities ● Hospital ● Libraries	● Gifts, skills capacities ● Students ● Parents ● Families ● Teachers	

Why Use It-implementing asset mapping can aid communities in the following ways:
- Identify development opportunities
- Expand community and partnership support systems
- Document, monitor and analyze community change
- Track program success
- Build communities

Community Den and Asset Mapping can lead to:
- Identify community assets and strengths
- Ensure the intervention's relevance to community needs
- Obtain buy-in from the community

Author Note: The overview and graphic noted in this section is only intended to serve as a brief introduction to community asset mapping.
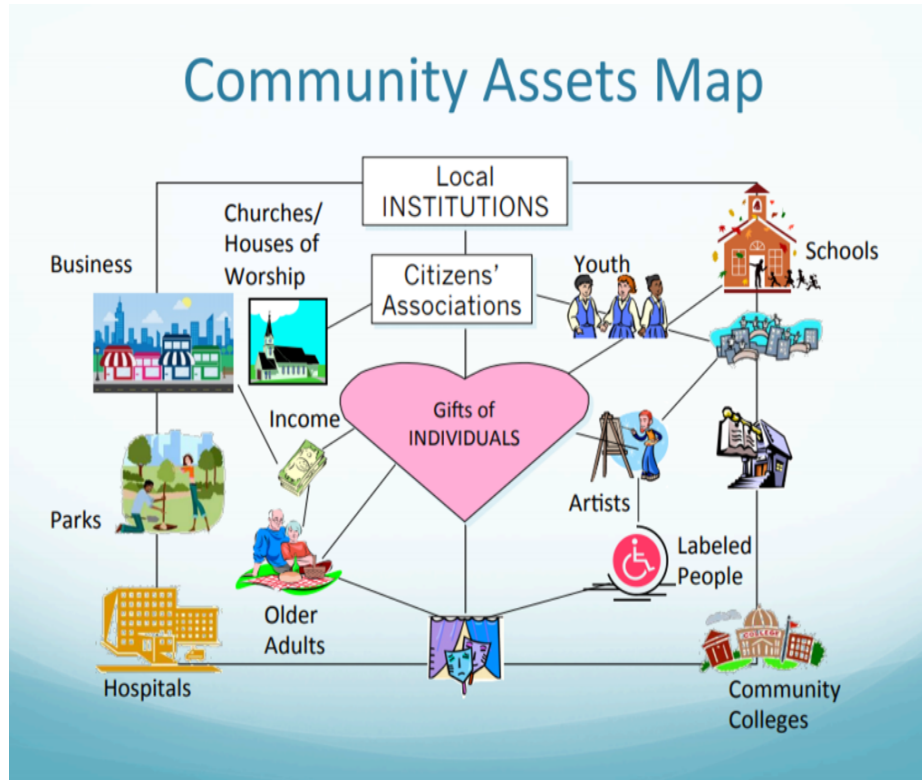
Note. Building Movement Project. (n.d.). "Asset Based Community Development Resources" Retrieved August 9, 2021, from https://tools2engage.org/tool_keywords/asset-mapping/.

Appendix E. Charles City Community Den Sign-in Sheet

Note: The information collected on this sheet will be kept private. It is only for use by Charles City Public School staff or Community Den support members to make improvements to the Community Den and better serve you in the future.

Date:_____

	First Name	**Last Name**	**CCPS Student**	**CCPS Employee**	**Charles City Community Member**	**Requested Items**
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						
9.						
10.						
11.						

Appendix F

Charles City Community Den Donation Form

Note: The information collected on this sheet will be kept private. It is only for use by Charles City Public School staff to keep track of our donors and incoming contributions. We will only reach out using the contact information you provide with your consent.

Date:

Name:

Contact information:

Can you detail/describe your donation to the Community Den (type of items, financial

contribution, etc.)?:

May we contact you with information and updates about the Community Den, including

when we are open, changes to our schedule, special events, and seasonal resource requests

for our patrons?   Yes   /   No