



Martin Blank

*In June the national Coalition for Community Schools awarded two of its six biennial awards for excellence to Nashville's Community Achieves and Pearl Cohn High School. Both focus on the social and emotional development and skills of staff and students.*



Kyla Krengel

*To help share what Nashville is doing, we spoke with Martin Blank, Director of the Coalition for Community Schools, and two leaders from Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS): Kyla Krengel, Director of Social and Emotional Learning, and Alison McArthur, Coordinator of Community Achieves.*



Alison  
McArthur

### **What's happening in Nashville, and what can the rest of the country learn from this work?**

**Blank:** Nashville has developed strategies that embed the work of partners and educators together to get better outcomes for kids. It has a structured, systemic approach, a community leadership group (including the Chamber of Commerce and other nonprofit, business, and government leaders) to provide oversight and guidance. It exemplifies how major metro school districts are working together with their communities.

**McArthur:** Five years ago, metro government, metro schools, nonprofits, and business leaders agreed on what to focus on, which now are our four pillars: family engagement, health and wellness, social services, and college and career readiness. For each, we have a series of outcomes and indicators focused on the whole child and the whole family.

### **How do community schools and social and emotional learning intersect? What are the commonalities in philosophies and approaches?**

**McArthur:** If you're a principal or community member who supports whole child work, you're committed to addressing whatever the barriers are. SEL goes in hand in hand with this. How can you not support self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, and the other SEL competencies?

**Krengel:** We've talked more this year about how the SEL work fits in with the Community Achieves schools—focusing on the core competencies to help children succeed in life, not just academically.

**Blank:** Developing SEL competencies doesn't just happen between 8:00 and 3:00. It's the responsibility of all agencies and institutions. The community school approach taps into the assets of other organizations...and opens up public schools to

these resources. It's an opportunity to send the right signals, so that kids always are hearing the choir speaking with one voice.

### **How is it working in practice?**

**McArthur:** Having a common framework creates opportunities for partners to focus on student outcomes. Sometimes schools have the answers. Sometimes partners have different ideas. We had one school that was focusing on reducing chronic absenteeism and the use of in-school suspensions for discipline. A local recycling organization offered a program that provided projects for kids to do during those times—to do service, to learn about recycling at the same time, and to get reconnected.

**Blank:** That's an example of how organizations see young people in different ways. Engaging them in doing positive things is more of a youth development perspective. When schools are smart, they're looking for projects like recycling to create robust learning experiences for kids. That's when the magic happens.

**Krengel:** In that example, the school principal had reached out to us to conduct an SEL walkthrough, which looks at the overall school climate, the integration of SEL into daily classroom instruction, and classroom management and behavior. She was very open to finding ways to connect with students, integrating SEL throughout the day, with support from teachers, administrators, and my team.

### **How important is it to develop adults' SEL knowledge and skills, too?**

**Krengel:** For our work to impact students, we need to work with adults and build their skills so they can model self-management, self-awareness, and other competencies.

**Blank:** We need a dual-capacity-building approach. Adults and students need to develop SEL skills. It's crucial to have access to joint professional learning experiences and to build the capacity of all the adults. School and community partners need to embed those SEL skills in their cultures.

### **The Award-Winners**

**Community Achieves** is an initiative of 23 schools serving more than 17,000 students that identifies, recruits, and coordinates organizations to support the needs of students and their families. Community Achieves partners with organizations like the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, adding to the district's nearly 600 external programs, supports, and partnerships working in the Community Achieves schools. [Learn more.](#)

**Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet High School** is committed to removing learning barriers by serving the whole child and whole family through "Academic Press and Personalization." Located at the center of two homeless shelters and five housing developments, Pearl-Cohn has strategically focused its efforts on restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed care. [Learn more.](#)

**Krengel:** Agreed. We're doing a lot of training with community partners on restorative practices. We have an annual SEL conference, now in its seventh year, with local partners presenting some of the sessions. We now have a common language inside and outside school.

**McArthur:** Partners are hungry for that knowledge.

**Krengel:** I'm on a metrowide steering committee that's looking at discipline disparities, called Passages. We had them do one of our SEL walkthroughs with us to understand what we look for beyond academics.

### **What's the role of the Community Achieves A-Team?**

**McArthur:** Alignment Nashville was created to align community resources to support schools. A-Teams such as Community Achieves focus on SEL, health, elementary, middle, and high school, for example. Each team incorporates input from MNPS leaders and community leaders. The Community Achieves team has been created to look at scaling-up and sustaining the community school work in MNPS.

**Blank:** You need to understand the trajectory. Over time bridges have been built in Nashville, with the school district and partners working more seamlessly, with a common language and common results. The strength of the steering committee reflects this emphasis. Its presence makes the work more systemic so it can survive leadership transitions and turnover.

### **What have been some of the major implementation challenges?**

**Krengel:** Lack of a common language was a huge barrier. Five years ago, there was no clear understanding of what SEL was. It's been a process of educating adults. It's a challenge because we do have turnover or school transfers each year. It's hard to ensure everyone is current on training.

**McArthur:** There's a constant cycle of turnover among community partners, too. Having the common language, the four pillars, and common metrics help partners stay focused.

**Blank:** There's more trust and a common focus now. Twenty-five years ago, the first battle was to get in the door of schools. Now educators and partners are doing walkthroughs and thinking together. That is a *big* step in the right direction.

### **Skeptics say both of your movements are too "touchy-feely." How do you respond?**

**Krengel:** We've developed SEL "I Can" statements and integrated them into the academic curriculum scope and sequence. We've shown teachers how to integrate this work into the academics.

**Blank:** Go listen to corporate leaders. This is the skill set they're looking for. It [academics vs. SEL] is a classic false dichotomy that people in the policy world like to create. It divides groups and kids. It's just silly.

### **What's next for Nashville?**

**McArthur:** Dr. Joseph [Nashville's new superintendent] has developed a 100-day plan, and an Alignment Nashville team is working on how to scale up and sustain our community schools work.

**Krengel:** We're doing lots of training so that all schools have a Tier 1 approach, universal prevention for all students, and are implementing their choice of SEL Foundations, PBIS, or Restorative Practices with fidelity. We're continuing the walkthroughs and providing follow-up support. And we're working with some middle and high schools to focus on SEL data, asking whether students feel safe, connected, cared for, and so on. We have a simple, three-question student survey, which helps schools know how connected their students feel to their teachers, classmates, and school. We're looking to add other schools.

### **RESOURCES**

[Coalition for Community Schools 2017 awardees.](#)

[Coalition for Community Schools.](#) The go-to resource for those interested in starting, improving, sustaining, or learning more about community schools.

[MNPS School Walkthrough Protocol.](#)

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