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Full Service Community Schools: Mexico, Missouri

Partners for Rural Impact Annual Report (2025)

The U.S. Department of Education awarded Partners for Rural Impact (PRI) a Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) capacity-building grant in 2023 to support Mexico (Missouri) Public Schools (MPS). FSCS capacity-building grants, in contrast with other FSCS grants, focus on the early stages of developing a robust Full-Service Community School in a single school district. The FSCS grant aims to enhance the capacity of MPS, its schools, and the community to provide supports, resources, and services for students and their families. A partnership with a local organization, Commitment to Community (C2C), manages the grant to marshal community resources for the enhancement of educational outcomes, community well-being, and economic empowerment.

Mexico is a small rural town of roughly 11,500 residents. MPS serves roughly 2,200 students in 5 K-12 schools and another 175 in a pre-kindergarten program. The student population is 72% White, 11% Multiracial, 9% Hispanic, and 7% Black. The MPS student body is more economically disadvantaged than the state average, with 77% of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch in contrast to 49% for the state. As seen in state-produced dashboards, the district lags state averages on some performance metrics such as academic performance, but not on all metrics:

- Seventy-nine percent of MPS students attended school at least 90% of the time, consistent with 79% for the state (2024-25 district-reported data to the state)
- Thirty-four percent of MPS students performed at the lowest Below Basic level in English Language Arts, in contrast to 19% for the state (2024-25 state assessment)
- Forty-three percent of MPS students performed at the lowest Below Basic level in Mathematics, in contrast to 28% for the state (2024-25 state assessment)
- Ninety-six percent of MPS students graduated in 4 years with a regular diploma, in contrast to 92% for the state (2024-25 state data)
- One and a half percent of MPS students drop-out without graduating or transferring, similar to 1.4% for the state (2024-25 state data)

The FSCS grant began implementation during a period of transition within the district, with a new superintendent beginning July 2024. Initial priorities for the grant team were to establish patterns of collaboration with district leadership, school leaders, and partner organizations in the community. In Mexico, community organizations are active in supporting students and families, and the FSCS grant began early on to draw on and strengthen the contributions from local businesses, churches, local agencies, recreation centers, and others.

In the first year of FSCS operation in Mexico, the FSCS school coordinators built the foundation for collaborative relationships that could be leveraged for increased impact. School coordinators increasingly earned the trust of school leadership and integrated their work into school operations and principal priorities. They began to have weekly sit-downs with principals, in addition to frequent informal check-ins, and most had desks in prominent physical locations near the principal. As school coordinator relationships with principals strengthened, coordinators could be responsive to principal asks while advancing work at the heart of the FSCS grant vision. At the district level, the new superintendent gained his bearings in the district and increasingly communicated with local FSCS leadership and a regional PRI manager for district purposes. The FSCS grant also targeted its early work toward a collaborative partnership with a major community service hub, the Mexico YMCA.

About this Report

This report synthesizes data Policy Studies Associates (PSA) has collected this past year in Mexico, Missouri. These data include needs assessments, surveys of principals and school coordinators, and site visit interviews and observations. The data point to several potential next steps and recommendations for PRI's consideration. In particular, this brief reports on ways in which the grant is:

- Providing enrichment outside of the school day and year
- Expanding youth engagement at school
- Strengthening community partnerships to improve youth and family well-being
- Contributing to district efforts to improve attendance

The report concludes with recommendations and next steps for consideration by FSCS grant staff.

Evaluation Findings

Providing enrichment outside of the school day and year

The FSCS grant has built a strong partnership with the Mexico YMCA, a highly utilized space and resource provider for the Mexico community. The YMCA is located close to two of the district's five K-12 schools and next to a municipal pool and park.

In collaboration with the YMCA, the FSCS grant has provided a range of out-of-school enrichment opportunities to support students and expand their growth and well-being. The FSCS partnership with the YMCA has also involved MPS, particularly around issues of student recruitment and transportation.

In recent years, there have been few after-school and summer opportunities delivered by MPS, outside of school sports programs. The YMCA, with FSCS support, fills a need in the community. One crucial FSCS contribution is funding for a program coordinator position for the management of after-school and summer programs. Another contribution for the summer program is the participation of FSCS school coordinators in the delivery of services and coordination of resources for participants. The coordinators rotate through grade-level groups, often working with students that they know from the school year. FSCS has bought materials for STEM activities and supported the coordination and funding of a van driver to transport needful students to programming.

FSCS supports led to the ability of the YMCA to substantially increase the number of students it could serve in the summer, providing 60 students with all-day, all-week programming for much of the summer. Similarly, FSCS support has allowed the YMCA to increase after school service slots from 40 to 45.

FSCS has also expanded the ability of the YMCA to provide enriching experiences through technology. The grant team was a partner in designing and buying materials for a Tech Lab at the YMCA, with the YMCA paying for staff to manage programming. The Tech Lab includes computers, a smart screen, comfortable furniture, and gaming units. It also houses educational tablets brokered by FSCS from Waterford. These tablets are solely loaded with math and reading applications and are assigned to individual Kindergarten and first-grade students, who use the tablets daily for scheduled periods during "tech time." The math and reading applications produce individualized data reports so staff can monitor and support progress.

Expanding youth engagement at school

The FSCS grant has supported youth by expanding their opportunities to engage in fun learning activities that help them develop relationships, grow individually, and bolster their interest in school. Generally, the impetus and delivery of engagement activities are school-specific, informed by student interest and priorities expressed by school leadership or staff. FSCS school coordinators find a need and implement the activities.

For example, Mexico Middle School has not had after-school enrichment programming, and the principal asked the FSCS school coordinator to explore options. The school coordinator surveyed students to identify topics of interest and designed a pilot of five programs as proof of concept, on the topics of art, drama, podcast production, Lego robotics, and strength training. At launch of the programs, the FSCS coordinator organized a ribbon-cutting ceremony with attendance by the superintendent and Chamber of Commerce members. The programs met after school three times a week in spring 2025, with the FSCS coordinator managing implementation and the grant supporting stipends for teachers and instructional assistants. The reception by students exceeded expectations. Sixty students expressed interest in the art programming, forcing the school to create multiple groups to accommodate interest.

The FSCS grant supported a variety of engaging growth opportunities for students in other schools as well. At one elementary school, the FSCS school coordinator initiated a young men's leadership group, providing guidance in communication, teamwork, hygiene, and leading in conflict and crisis. Speakers included local bank presidents, high school students, the district athletic director, and an emergency management professional. The success of the pilot led to expansion to include additional cohorts and a group for young women. At another school, the FSCS school coordinator organized supports and entries for the state writing contest, hosted by PBS (Public Broadcasting Service). Two of the school's students won for their grade level and had their pictures in the local newspaper.

Strengthening community partnerships to improve youth and family well-being

School staffs have limited capacity to sustain and coordinate community partnerships, including those that can provide needed resources. MPS does not have formal staff positions dedicated to connecting families with resources and services in the community. The FSCS grant staff have strengthened the coordination of partner supports in Mexico schools, and in some cases brought new partner resources to students and families. Many of these partnerships help to improve the health and well-being of students and families. FSCS staff are continuously reaching out to partners by participating in community events hosted by others such as area churches or by hosting their own community events, such as a health fair in which they invite others to join.

One example of partner coordination was the development of medical action plans for students at one elementary school. Families and school staff were unclear regarding the medical needs and prescriptions of students. An FSCS school coordinator drew on her previous experience in special education and social work to develop medical action plans that clearly described protocols for students, so that school staff could carry them out within HIPAA regulations. She reached out to parents, pharmacies, doctors, social workers, the school nurse, and dental providers to collect information on the needs of high-need students. Additionally, she developed a form for parental consent to have medication delivered to the school, helping to streamline school-day administration and improving clarity around medicine dosage, purposes, refills, and schedules for renewing prescriptions. Medical

action plans included reference to community clinics and access to care. Ultimately, these plans helped the school understand student needs holistically and be able identify the sources of health and behavioral challenges.

Food insecurity is a problem for many Mexico youth and families, and FSCS staff have worked with partners to help mitigate hunger in its student population. For instance, one FSCS school coordinator has worked with the local food pantry to provide “Buddy Packs” that include food and hygiene items on a weekly basis to nearly 80 students at the school. Another coordinator worked with Quaker Oats to get donations of healthy snacks. Another has a partnership with Little Caesar’s for pizza donations for family events.

FSCS school coordinators have also helped to address wellness issues that can inhibit learning, such as lice and flea outbreaks. The grant has coordinated support from the state Department of Health, secured donations from local business, and communicated with families about treatment. While securing lice kits from the health department was seen as an important step, it became clear that laundry and eradication protocols were also critical to mitigate community spread. A local laundromat donated laundry services, and large companies (Unilever and Procter & Gamble) donated detergent.

Contributing to district efforts to improve attendance

One of the new superintendent’s priorities is improving student attendance. He counts on the FSCS grant as a key support for improving attendance. The FSCS grant can help promote attendance in a myriad of ways that remove barriers to absenteeism and promote student and family engagement with school. At the grant’s outset, before the 2024-25 school year, FSCS helped to support a district attendance summit. The grant helped to bring in nationally recognized attendance experts, Attendance Works, to engage district-wide and at individual schools to reveal the root causes and solutions for absenteeism. This summit also provided an opportunity to bring together partners in other organizations and agencies to collaboratively share, learn, and plan.

The superintendent believes FSCS school coordinators are well positioned to help identify family needs affecting student attendance, helping school leadership and staff plan. School coordinators have conducted home visits to problem solve with families, in partnership with the district attendance coordinator. On a daily basis, school coordinators nurture positive relationships with individual students, so that they can learn more about their needs and barriers to attendance. Transportation to school is a salient challenge for some families, and school coordinators have been involved in solution-finding discussions. The superintendent pointed out that FSCS school coordinators have also been instrumental in mitigating lice and flea outbreaks, which were significant cause of absenteeism in 2024-25.

The FSCS grant has been a key lever in the district’s efforts to make school an appealing place where kids and their families want to come. As mentioned above, the grant has introduced enrichment opportunities during and after school, something the superintendent called out as one of the grant’s biggest successes in Mexico. The grant also supports book incentives for students that improve their attendance or maintain high attendance. School coordinators also contribute to communication and outreach efforts to engage families in school, particularly through events and social media posts. Through ongoing surveys and informal conversations, they sense family and student needs and interests, to inform future services provided by the grant in partnership with the school.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The following recommendations and suggested next steps are intended to help the FSCS grant staff to identify high-leverage ways to build and sustain progress to date.

- **Continue to clarify a strategic vision that promotes FSCS grant priorities within the context of C2C operations and the district's priorities.** In its first year, the FSCS grant sensed needs in the community, developed relationships with district and school leaders, and made strides in implementation that delivered needed services. As it continues, the FSCS grant can draw on its early learnings and successes to refine a strategic vision for how it will have a lasting impact on the community. Staff can identify priority areas in which it can make a difference and clarify the strategies to carry out those priority areas. It will likely be helpful to clarify how the FSCS grant vision fits within the broader C2C agenda and operations, including FSCS-specific expectations and grant requirements. Similarly, an FSCS strategic vision can be communicated with district and school leaders (and other in the community) for additional clarity around FSCS work and built into coordinated planning within the district.
- **When clarifying a strategic vision, consider community needs and FSCS strengths to identify priority areas.** As a grant team it may be easy to deliver disparate services in response to emerging needs. Give careful thought to which problems the FSCS grant can prioritize as key service areas, and how the grant can work with partners and the district in a coordinated way. The past successes and strengthened relationship with district staff may provide more of a runway for the grant team to focus its work on several areas. For instance, consider the following:
 - ***Lean into the progress around enrichment and after school services.*** The superintendent called out FSCS after-school programming as a strength, and parents expressed an interest in having additional enrichment opportunities in the PSA needs assessment survey.
 - ***Continue to support district attendance efforts.*** FSCS has supported the district in this area, and the work of school coordinators has helped to make school more engaging. Consider other ways FSCS can support the district, such as through systems to track absenteeism and provide student/family supports (e.g., Check and Connect, partnership with attendance coordinators, home visits).
 - ***Embolden efforts to support kindergarten readiness.*** The FSCS grant supports the district's two elementary schools and McMillan Early Learning Center. Consider how it can help to coordinate pre-kindergarten preparation for kindergarten, both for students at McMillan as well as those pre-kindergarten students that are in non-district settings (e.g., parent resources, summer camp for rising kindergarteners).
 - ***Work with principals to consider ways FSCS can support academics.*** The FSCS grant may be able to make valuable contributions to teachers by supporting professional development opportunities or providing instructional materials. The grant also may be able to support students through tutoring opportunities, whether during the school day or outside of it.
 - ***Consider opportunities to support post-secondary preparation and career exploration.*** With its connections to community partners, C2C and the FSCS grant may be able to support district efforts to help students consider future careers and education. Explore whether Mexico secondary schools and/or the Hart Center would benefit from FSCS support.

- **Develop processes that support internal FSCS communication and continuous improvement.** The FSCS grant has had successes in schools and with the YMCA, though some of these successes were site-specific and siloed. FSCS staff can enhance their efforts to share successes and challenges across schools, with the intention of learning from each other, coordinating service, and scaling promising practices. For instance, school coordinators and grant leaders can develop meeting schedules and agendas that promote collaborative talk and continuous improvement, alongside more mundane administrative tasks.
- **Document FSCS successes and stories for external and internal audiences.** A common challenge among grant teams is telling the story of their work and impact, amidst the hard work of delivering services. With so much progress made, the FSCS grant in Mexico has an opportunity to document these successes in a way that can inform others and celebrate the good work. These types of stories can serve multiple purposes, including providing evidence of grant benefits, documenting a strategy that can be replicated or scaled, building awareness of the grant among community members and potential partners, and helping grant staff align and learn from each other. Documentation of FSCS work could appear on the C2C and PRI websites, in blog or social media postings, on flyers shared with community members and potential partners, in district or school newsletters, and so on.

