



Working Together to Strengthen Community Schools

PHILADELPHIA FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

■ THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA HAS LONG BEEN A LEADER IN the community schools movement, which views schools as neighborhood hubs that provide not only afterschool enrichment programs for children, but education and services—from healthcare to tax help—to families.

The Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania has worked for years creating and evaluating programs in West Philadelphia schools. But so many programs sprouted over time, originated by both Penn and local nonprofit organizations, that groups sometimes found themselves at odds, competing for students or elbowing each other out of cafeterias or gyms. At many public schools, teachers weren't even aware of the afterschool resources available for students, much less able to integrate enrichment programs into their curriculum.

That's where the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers stepped in. With support from the AFT Innovation Fund, the union is taking stock of all the community programs in a low-income West Philadelphia neighborhood encompassing five public schools, collecting data to measure their effectiveness, communicating with teachers about strengthening the programs, and streamlining the afterschool and family offerings into a cohesive, coherent whole.

The project also is aimed at strengthening a historically skeptical relationship between Penn and local educators, who at times viewed the university as an elite entity imposing programs on an impoverished community's children without explaining anything to parents or teachers.

"We're making sure everybody is working together instead of against each other," said Ron Houston, a computer teacher at Alexander Wilson Elementary School and part of the leadership team working on

community programs there. "The problem is, schools are so often in their own little world. There has to be some type of open dialogue or communication."

By pooling a community's enrichment resources, schools offer students greater opportunities to succeed, Houston added.

"Programs on an individual basis are overwhelmingly successful," said Cory Bowman, the Netter Center's associate director. "Part of the challenge is figuring out how they add up."

At Wilson, many families had never heard of the Police Athletic League's programs at the school, including team sports, cheerleading, and trips to Phillies and 76ers games. So, with the encouragement of the Innovation Fund team, instructional support teacher Patricia McKelvie worked to spread the word across campus. (The K-6 school also offers tutoring and nutrition help after school.)

Wilson also needed help monitoring its research-based recess program, which directs children to play stations manned by adults to promote cooperative play and avoid aggressive behavior. Innovation Fund Project Director Brandon Miller connected Wilson educators with students at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, literally next door to the elementary school campus. The university created a work-study position for its students to staff Wilson recesses, solving Wilson's manpower shortage.

Programs like this are meant "to make sure we really maximize the effect of these programs on the kids," McKelvie said, meeting their needs by "working smarter with the programs in an organized fashion."

Project Director Miller also hopes

"We're making sure everybody is working together instead of against each other."

RON HUSTON

Computer teacher, Alexander Wilson Elementary School



to coordinate numerous existing college-access and college-readiness programs, including campus visits and SAT preparation courses, to ensure there are no gaps in services to aid college-bound high schoolers. He is working to engage teachers on the kinds of programs they'd like to see introduced in their schools. The staff at Benjamin B. Comegys Elementary School envisions afterschool music enrichment, so Miller is bringing Penn's music department, Temple University's Department of Music Education, and Comegys together to collaborate.

"We wanted to enhance what was already occurring, plus refine it and involve more of the neighborhood," said Dee Phillips, the vice president, middle years, of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers.

The goal is to create a feeder pattern of services from kindergarten through high school, making public schools true community hubs. Phillips hopes to replicate services such as the in-school health clinic at William L. Sayre High School, which provides care to students and parents, and teaches students first-hand about health professions. By educating the "whole child" in productive, healthy learning environments, Phillips said, "we start setting the tone for their lives at an early age."

The work has been tough going, as Miller and Phillips struggle to get a foothold in a school district that has undergone dramatic shakeups in the last year under Superintendent Arlene Ackerman's school reforms. Principals central to the project have been shifted to different schools. The administration itself was completely restructured. And while the AFT grant was awarded in October 2009, union contract negotiations prevented the project from launching until April 2010. Even then, the community schools inventory and overhaul wasn't a priority of teachers preoccupied with a new curriculum and

a school district in flux.

"With all of the changes, we've muddled right along," Phillips said. "We've kind of jumped over these hurdles. We take five steps forward, we get knocked down and take a couple steps back, and we regroup." The project was originally intended to include 10 West Philadelphia schools in two feeder areas, but after the challenges of the first year, has been scaled back to five schools that serve about 3,500 students.

The many leadership changes across the district have underscored the need for the "distributed leadership" model the grant hopes to incorporate into community schools. The theory is that by training teachers and school staff, rather than principals alone, to make decisions about enrichment programs, the initiatives can remain stable in spite of staff turnover.

"If you have a principal who leaves, that leadership doesn't leave with them," Miller said. Such continuity "is critical to sustaining and replicating school successes," said Philadelphia Federation of Teachers President Jerry T. Jordan.

PFT Vice President Phillips believes the team has made definite progress: meetings and training sessions made possible by the grant have allowed teachers "who really knew nothing about what was going on in their school" to better understand school needs and the benefit of community resources.

"The majority of our kids live in challenging circumstances and don't have advantages that other kids have," said Linda Harris, the special assistant to the president of the union. "So we want to make the school the focal point to address their needs."



AFT Innovation Fund

555 New Jersey Ave, N.W., Washington, DC 20001

T: 202/879-4524 **E:** innovate@aft.org **W:** www.aft.org/innovate

