



Schools at the Center of Communities

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ONE OUT OF FIVE CHILDREN in the United States lives in poverty today, according to the latest Kids Count report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. That number has climbed steadily over the past few years, despite claims that our nation is recovering from the Great Recession.

In our public school system, the rate is even higher—one in two students is poor. What that means is that teachers, like Sonya Romero in Albuquerque, New Mexico, have become first responders to the stress, exhaustion, and hardship these kids face, day in and day out.

Meanwhile, this school year is starting with widespread teacher shortages, and teachers are feeling more strained than ever before. Nearly three-quarters of educators find their work stressful, while 96 percent are physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of the day, according to a recent survey from the AFT and the Badass Teachers Association.

"When my students first come in my door in the morning," says Sonya, who has taught kindergarten for 19 years, "the first thing I do is an inventory of immediate needs: Did you eat? Are you clean? A big part of my job is making them feel safe. The job of teacher has expanded to counselor, therapist, doctor, parent, attorney."

Teachers like Sonya want to help kids, but they know they can't do it alone. Which is why, in school districts across the country, AFT affiliates and their partners are bringing together the resources of our communities to help raise up all children—and give them and their families the supports and resources they need to succeed.

The community school strategy—using the neighborhood public school to weave together community partners to provide all the services and supports students and their families need—has proven incredibly effective in helping to mitigate inequity and poverty.

Here's what happens at community schools: educators, school leaders, parents, businesses, faith-based organizations, higher education institutions, public agencies, and community groups determine—together—how to fill their community's needs, from child care services and dental clinics, to counseling, English language instruction, family engagement opportunities, legal assistance, and housing services. The aim is to provide coordinated supports to give students,

and high-stakes consequences of standardized tests. They also believe that schools are underfunded. What these poll results tell us is that parents have a good sense of the better path for their kids—public schools where children are engaged, class sizes are smaller, teachers are supported, and all students have access to a relevant, well-rounded curriculum and wraparound services.

The AFT and others have called for increased support for community schools

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parents, and teachers the tools to teach, learn, and grow. As a result, community schools become centers of the community.

There are 5,000 community schools in the United States today, serving more than 150 localities. Community schools in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, and many other cities (including Austin, Texas, as outlined in this issue) have boasted extraordinary success, with drops in chronic absenteeism, lower dropout rates, increased graduation rates, and better student participation in afterschool programs.

However, in order to truly build on this success and help all kids get what they need, we must scale up and sustain the community school strategy with support, both public and private, at the federal, state, and local levels. We must move away from our current obsession with measuring and sanctioning, and move toward an approach of supporting and improving and working together to meet the needs of the whole child.

Most Americans agree with this strategy. According to the latest Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools, our nation is fed up with the overemphasis

in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Senate version of the law, known as the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015, includes an amendment sponsored by Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) to create a dedicated grant program to support schools that want to implement the community school strategy, in addition to an amendment by Senators Brown, Manchin, and Shelley Capito (R-WV) to support the community school model as a way to improve student safety, health, and academic achievement.

At the same time, we need to promote local and state policies to support community schools, from the statehouse to the school board, to ensure that the community school model is implemented and funded.

We know what works. We know what we need to do. Instead of pursuing strategies that promote deepening inequities, we must invest in services that level the playing field. The community school model is built on shared responsibility and effective solutions. It's going to take all of us working together to create safe, welcoming neighborhood public schools that are at the center of flourishing communities.

