Freeing Teachers to Teach

Students in Full-Service Community Schools Are Ready to Learn

By Jane Quinn and Joy Dryfoos

Imagine you are a third-grade teacher in a low-income school, and at the beginning of the year, you are invited to review your class list with a community resource coordinator, a school social worker, and a mental health worker (who was assigned to the school by a local agency). Imagine working with that group to identify all of your students' circumstances that might warrant special attention—for example, a father not being in the home, poor housing conditions, bad attendance records, and the like—and then each team member taking on a specific follow-up assignment, such as visiting homes, enrolling students in an afterschool program, or providing parents with employment assistance. Imagine repeating this process every three months, so that everyone on the team is well aware of his or her responsibilities regarding each child and each family. For a third-grade teacher at the Gardner Pilot Academy in Boston, none of this is imagined—it's reality. As she says, "It is such a relief to have other people with whom I can share the ups and downs of my students' lives. A few of them need so much attention. If I spend the time with them, I let the rest of the class down. Under this arrangement, everyone gets what he or she needs."[1]

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School systems throughout the country are experiencing dramatic challenges. The achievement gap stubbornly persists, the true dropout rates are shocking, and the behavior challenges of many children are enough to drive any teacher out of the classroom. The basic premise underlying community schools is that schools, by themselves, cannot address all the needs of today's students. Partners are required to help provide the services, opportunities, and supports needed by students and their families.

Full-service community schools are public schools that:

- are open most of the time (before and after school, evenings, vacations, and summers);
- operate jointly through a partnership between the school and one or more community agencies that take the lead in finding and coordinating resources;
- provide access to health, dental, and mental health services;
- provide a family resource center and opportunities for parents to be involved in the school;
- ensure that afterschool and summer enrichment programs reinforce and extend the school curriculum;
- offer social and educational services for families and community members; and
- strengthen the neighborhood's ability to address its problems.

If these ideas and services are implemented effectively, community schools also offer academic benefits because teachers are able to concentrate on what they know best: intellectually stimulating children who are ready to learn. Drawing on the relevant research, our own nearly two decades of on-the-ground experience, and several interviews we recently conducted with teachers in full-service community schools, this article explores how the community school strategy for meeting students' needs enhances teachers' practice.

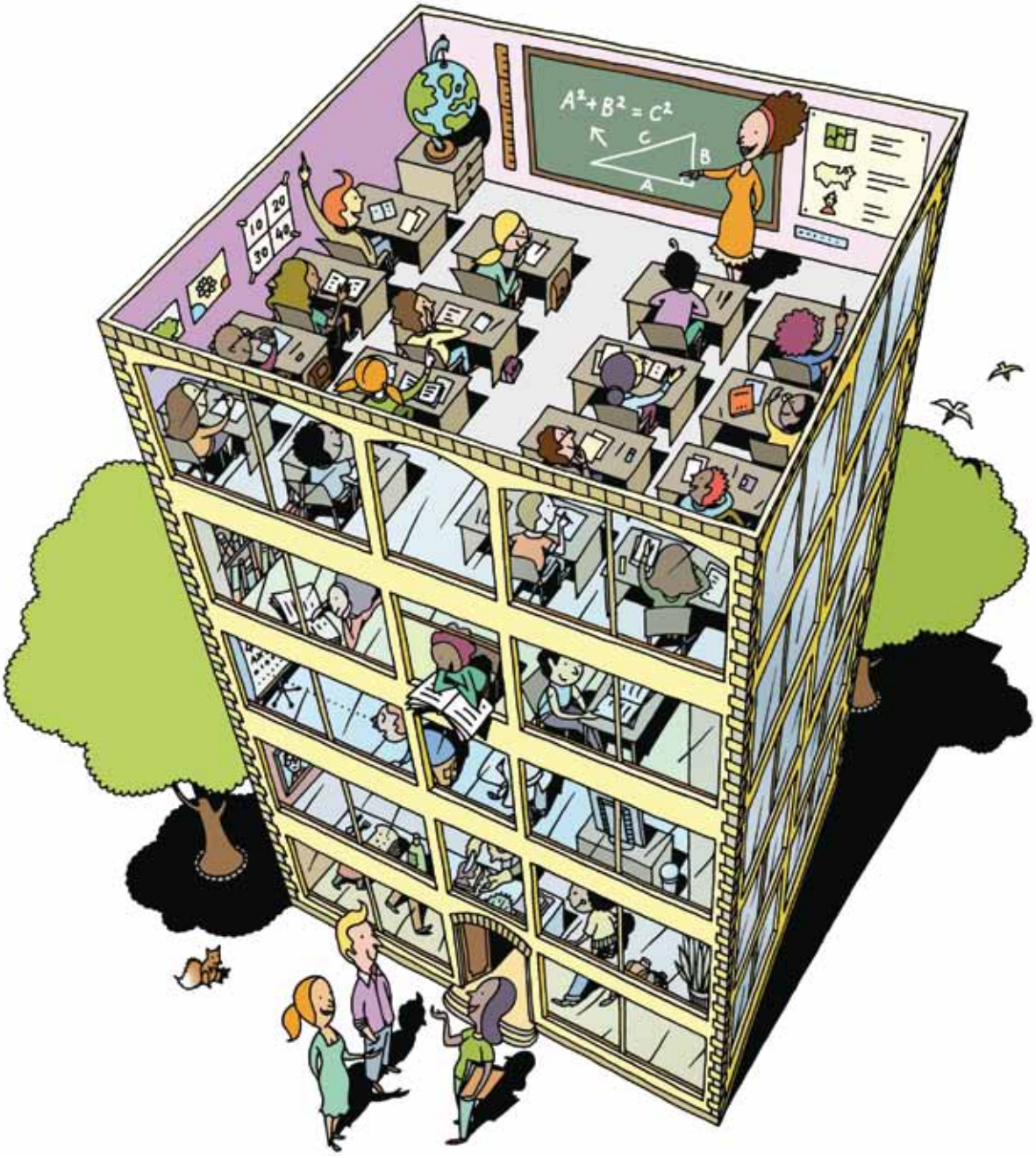
Listening to Teachers' Voices

Teachers' voices figured prominently in one of the earliest longitudinal studies of community schools. Conducted between 1993 and 1999, the study* was commissioned by the Children's Aid Society (CAS), a nonprofit organization that began partnering with New York City's public schools in 1989 to address the extraordinary social, health, and economic needs of students in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. One of the key findings of the study was generated during interviews and focus groups with teachers: they consistently reported that the presence of other caring, competent professionals in their buildings enabled them to teach. Discussing the results at P.S. 5, an elementary school that CAS began working with in 1993, the evaluation team wrote:

> Perhaps the most consistent comment from respondents was that the wealth of services and programs provided by CAS freed teachers up to do what they were hired to do—teach the children. Several people commented that teachers in most schools—and particularly in schools serving

Jane Quinn is the assistant executive director for community schools with the Children's Aid Society, where she directs the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools. Joy Dryfoos is an independent consultant and the author of numerous books, including Full-Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families. *Along with Carol Barkin, Quinn and Dryfoos coedited* Community Schools in Action: Lessons from a Decade of Practice.

*Results included improved academic achievement, improved student and teacher attendance, better student-teacher relationships, improved school climate, and dramatic increases in parent involvement. To learn more, see **www.childrensaidsociety.org/files/Complete_Manual.pdf**.



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poor, minority communities—spend much of their time dealing with children's non-academic problems, and playing nurse, social worker and recreation counselor. Because children's needs in these areas are being met through the services provided at P.S. 5, and because teachers have the luxury of giving many students more individualized attention during the after-school program, they can focus exclusively on teaching during their classroom time. It is clear that teachers' experience of being in the classroom is quite different at P.S. 5 than at other schools.[2]

Just what is the experience of teachers who work in community schools? And how is that experience different from teachers' work in more traditional schools? Teachers in well-developed community schools typically report the following six benefits, each of which we elaborate on below: (1) more children enter school ready to learn; (2) students attend school more regularly and move less often; (3) parents are more involved in their children's education—at home and in school; (4) students have greater access to health care, including medical, dental, and mental health services; (5) students have greater access to extended learning opportunities, including afterschool and summer enrichment programs; and (6) community support for public schools is enhanced through active community involvement.

Benefit #1: Improved School Readiness

Many community schools make explicit links to early childhood education programs in their areas, and some elementary-level community schools incorporate early care and education programs in their buildings, providing a continuum of services from prekindergarten (or even birth) through fifth or sixth grade. For example, CAS works in partnership with the New York City Department of Education to sponsor two community schools in

the Washington Heights neighborhood—P.S. 5 (referenced above) and P.S. 8—that integrate Early Head Start and Head Start programs into their pre-K through fifth grade elementary programs. Both schools serve low-income, predominantly immigrant populations. Families can enroll in the Early Head Start program during pregnancy, knowing they are expected to make a five-year commitment to participate in comprehensive educational, health, and social services, after which their children transition into public school classes within the same building.

Multiple evaluations have shown that students in this program are well prepared for kindergarten, that their parents maintain high levels of involvement in their children's education through elementary school, that mothers in the Early Head Start program show decreases in depression and stress over the course of participation in the program, and that parents report increases in the quality and size of their social support networks.[3]

The Kendall-Whittier Elementary School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is another community school that takes an intentional approach to linking early childhood and elementary education, resulting in multiple benefits for students, families, and teachers. Janet McKenzie, a veteran kindergarten teacher at Kendall-Whittier, explains that her school came into being through a restructuring process that occurred in 1991. "Teachers who applied to work in this school were taking on a big challenge. We were going to what most people considered the worst building and the most challenging neighborhood.... Everyone told us not to go. But the bottom line is that a large group of teachers left their comfortable positions by choice for a school year of uncertainty, enormous challenges, difficult physical conditions, long hours, and a neighborhood unsettled by change. But in exchange, we got to envision and plan a new school that we believed could literally change lives."

The resulting school integrates early childhood into the elementary grades. According to McKenzie, "We have had a focus on early childhood from the beginning, understanding the benefits and the ramifications. Eventually, we had an Even Start program for children from birth to age 4 whose parents were enrolled in our half-day GED program. Then we also began our own full-day, 4-year-old classes. Our teachers are very involved with the students and their families. We regularly make home visits, and our teachers are visible and extremely involved in the community outside the school."

The linkage between early childhood and elementary education, coupled with the extensive involvement of teachers in the community, has led to several notable results. According to McKenzie, "In the past, we struggled to get anyone to enroll early for kindergarten or pre-K, but now parents almost have to set up tents the night before to get a place in line! Our pre-K program is filled long before noon on enrollment day. Our community 'gets' that pre-K is vital to school success, and they want to make sure their children are able to participate."[4]

Benefit #2: Increased Student Attendance and Reduced Student Mobility

Several evaluations of community schools have documented increased student attendance and reduced student mobility. For example, the Children's Aid Society's longitudinal study mentioned above showed that student and teacher attendance was better at CAS's community schools than at regular schools with similar demographics.[5] Studies of the national Communities In Schools program, the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods initiative in Multnomah County, Oregon, and the Chicago Community Schools Initiative also have demonstrated positive results in attendance and mobility.[6] Several features of community schools contribute to these positive benefits, including the presence of on-site or school-linked health services, the ready availability of social services to address family problems, and the opportunity to attend engaging afterschool programs.

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The implications of improved student attendance and reduced student mobility are enormous for teachers. Most importantly, teachers lose less instructional time to catching up students who have been absent and to integrating new students into their classrooms midyear.

Chronic early absenteeism—when students in the early elementary grades miss a month or more of school each year—is a subset of attendance issues that is generating national research attention. For example, a recent report by the Center for New York City Affairs indicated that more than 90,000 kindergarten through fifth-grade students in New York City's public schools missed a month or more of school during the last academic year.[7] Teachers know all too well the price they and their students pay for this problem. The report called for widespread implementation of the community school strategy, based on a very clear understanding that chronic early absenteeism is highly correlated with health and family problems—two issues that the community school strategy is designed to address.

Benefit #3: Increased Parental Involvement

Evaluations consistently document higher levels of parent and family engagement in community schools than in traditional

public schools, for many reasons. Teachers at these schools report that they are more likely to reach out to families by, for example, making home visits and regular phone calls. Also, many community schools consistently partner with community agencies that have deep knowledge of, and good relationships with, families, such as family service agencies and YMCAs. Many community schools offer a wide range of opportunities for families to engage in the life of the school and in their children's education. Researcher Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University has outlined six types of parent involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community[8]—all of which are found in well-developed community schools.

Heather Vaughn, an experienced teacher who currently works for the Albuquerque Public Schools' Office of Professional Development, offers training and support to early childhood teachers, grades pre-K through 2. As a result of the district's community schools initiative, she has observed many positive changes in family engagement and parent-teacher relationships: "I'm definitely seeing a shift. Now the teachers don't have to carry the whole weight of everything that happens at the school. Parents have become key players and are 'at the table' as partners. In my experience, many schools give lip service to the notion that parents are partners in their children's education, but the community school strategy puts that theory into practice. We now actively ask parents, 'How are you sharing with the school what you know about your child?' I see more reciprocity between schools and parents—it's now much more of a two-way street."

Vaughn has observed that as parents become involved in multiple aspects of the Albuquerque Public Schools, as they move "beyond homework" into roles as decision makers, volunteers, and workshop participants, teachers recognize and support them as part of "the broader community of learners." Reflecting on the multiple benefits she has witnessed firsthand, Vaughn muses, "Why aren't all of our schools community schools?"[9]

Her colleague Dolores Griego, a school board member in Albuquerque, notes that "family liaisons have generated parent involvement beyond our expectations." These key staff members are hired from the local community and trained by the district's Community Schools Department. Because of their deep community roots, the family liaisons are able to conduct outreach to parents and quickly earn their trust. Griego observes that one role of the family liaisons is to build community leadership and cites, as a recent example, that 40 parents went to the state legislature to advocate for a school-based health center at their local school (Pajarito Elementary). "The parents see the bigger picture, beyond what is currently offered at their kids' school. They know that kids miss a lot of school because of immunizations and illness. They see a vacant lot next to the school and wonder, 'Why can't we build a clinic on that land?' Their role has been extended from 'parent of this child' to 'parent of this community.' "[10]

Benefit #4: Greater Access to Health Care

It is axiomatic that health is inextricably linked to students' school success. We often hear that children who can't see the blackboard will have a tough time learning, and a strong body of research undergirds this commonsense argument.[11] There is growing support for finding new ways to link health care to education, particularly through partnerships with community resources. For example, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan observed that when he was superintendent of schools in Chicago, "we attached health care clinics to about two dozen of our schools. Where schools become the centers of the community, great things happen for kids."[12]

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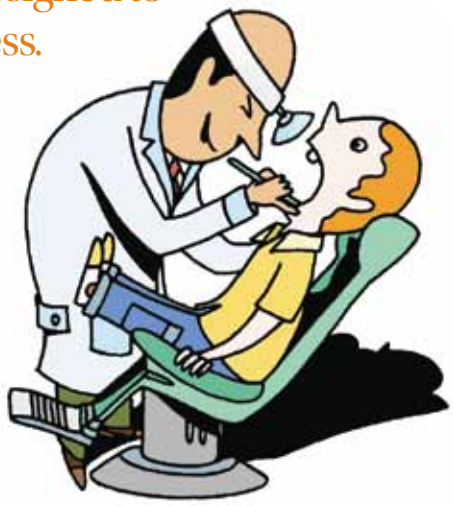

Full-service community schools partner with health care providers to address the medical, dental, and mental health needs of students, offering either school-based or school-linked services. In the school-based model, health providers offer on-site services, often through a student wellness center that operates during and after the regular school day. According to the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care, at least 1,700 schools in the United States currently offer such services.[13]

A promising alternative to school-based health centers is the school-linked model, an approach that moves beyond the traditional (and often unsuccessful) referral system to build a bridge between schools and community-based health services. In this model, a school-based health liaison makes appointments for students at a partnering health center, works with parents to obtain their active consent, and escorts groups of students from the school to the health center and back.

Both on-site and school-linked models are able to accommodate students' needs for immunizations, regular and athletic physicals, treatment of chronic illnesses, first aid, and ongoing preventive care.

Charles Braman, a middle school teacher at another CAS community school, the Salome Ureña de Henriquez Campus in New York City, notes that, "As a classroom teacher, my primary objective, as well as my area of expertise, is academic. However,

the reality of working with adolescent students is that their needs stretch far beyond the realm of academics. Oftentimes, my students have needs that I am not equipped to deal with as an English teacher. This is where being a community school comes into play. As part of the community schools program, I am able to refer my students to a doctor, dentist, social worker, psychologist, mentor, or afterschool club/activity. When my students are healthy, active, and engaged in the school community, it is much easier to provide rigorous reading and writing instruction."[14]

Benefit #5: Greater Access to Extended Learning Opportunities

A spate of recent reports has called national attention to the risks and opportunities inherent in the nonschool hours.[15] Among the best of these reports is a publication titled *On the Clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time*, by Education Sector, which explains that there is a relationship between time and student achievement, but that how the time is used is key: "Students who are given more allocated school time have outcomes only slightly better than students who receive less. But the correlation between time and achievement increases when students are given more instructional time, and it is even greater when students' academic learning time increases."[16]

Such opportunities are central to the concept of community schools and constitute a core element of the strategy. Full-service community schools are open after school and well into the evening all year long, offering a rich array of academic opportunities (both remedial and advanced), in addition to social, cultural, and recreational enrichment opportunities. To Jennifer Archibald, a 28-year veteran teacher in New York City who also teaches at the Salome Ureña campus, the benefits of extended academic and enrichment opportunities are clear:

> I taught in a traditional public school for 10 years, and I can tell you that there is a world of difference between traditional schools and community schools. In the traditional public school, students were dismissed at three o'clock and the teachers followed soon after. There were no afterschool activities or programs. Community schools, in contrast, provide programs that are inclusive of the whole community.
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> A wide range of activities and programs are available to the students at our campus. There is the extended-day program, which provides homework help, club opportunities, tutoring, team sports, and recreational activities … as well as service-learning opportunities for high school students. The Teen Program during the evenings gives teenagers opportunities to have positive social and learning experiences. They participate in college workshops and are given work opportunities with the program. Students whose families cannot afford to take them on summer vacations have summer camp available to them.
>
> All of these experiences give our students a big advantage. They are better prepared for class. Their social skills improve because when they are involved in the clubs and recreational activities, they form friendships and learn social skills that carry over to the school day, resulting in fewer conflicts. Our partnership with the Children's Aid Society is truly a blessing to our community.[17]

"I am able to refer my students to a doctor, dentist, social worker, psychologist, mentor, or afterschool club/activity."

—CHARLES BRAMAN, MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

Benefit #6: Enhanced Community Support for Public Schools

Community schools promote better use of school buildings, and their neighborhoods enjoy increased security, heightened community pride, and better rapport among students and residents.[18] Now that only 31 percent of American households have children under the age of 18, we have to ensure that the good work of our teachers and students is visible to the voting public.[19] When schools welcome parents and other adults, regularly showcase the work of students and their teachers, and offer opportunities for members of the general (taxpaying) public to benefit from the school's facilities and programs, they are more likely to get a "yes" vote on a new tax referendum. And schools that partner in a regular and authentic way with other community organizations are more likely to find allies who are willing to testify with them at city and state budget hearings. Similarly, engaged parents can become an extremely powerful political force, as we saw in the Albuquerque example earlier.

Success begets success. For instance, after 17 years of working with CAS to build community partnerships, the Salome Ureña de Henriquez Campus now has an annual Dominican Heritage celebration that draws over 1,000 participants. The event has become so successful that elected officials—including members of the New York City Council, the New York State Assembly, and United States Congress—don't want to miss it. This year, U.S. Representative Charles Rangel spoke at the event, which represented a powerful display of an actively engaged constituency for public education.

Changing Practices, Improving Services

Opening the schoolhouse door to the community is only a first step toward realizing the promise of full-service community schools. What goes on in that building to combine quality education, enrichment, student and family support services, parent involvement, and community development requires more than merely extending the time the building is open. It requires the willingness and commitment of all partners to conduct their business differently.

For example, in CAS community schools, social workers have greatly expanded their roles beyond traditional counseling services by offering classroom consultation to teachers and working with school leaders to address school climate issues, including establishing positive behavioral norms and consistent schoolwide discipline. Afterschool program staff use city and state academic standards to plan academic enrichment interventions, particularly in core subjects such as literacy, mathematics, and science. Physicians and nurse practitioners regularly ask students how they are doing in school and ask to see their report cards. Joint staff development helps teachers and CAS staff share their respective areas of expertise and stay "on the same page" about everything from the overall vision of the partnership to the day-to-day procedures involved in working together.

As the community school strategy has expanded across the country over the past 15 years, one of the greatest challenges for teachers has been the joint use of classrooms. Many teachers have been asked by their principals and partners to move beyond the concept of "my" classroom. And community partners who use classrooms during the nonschool hours have had to learn how to develop protocols and procedures for their staff members on sharing space (and particularly cleaning up). Many community schools have developed a joint system of governance, either through the integration of community partners into the school's regular governance structures (such as a school leadership team or local site council) or through the establishment of a community school oversight committee. Such structures have provided opportunities for the development of ground rules for working together as well as a forum for joint problem solving.

Although the processes of planning, implementation, and collaboration sound complex, they can be boiled down to one simple concept: building relationships. If an institution is going to be effective in fulfilling its mission, people have to talk to each other frequently and listen carefully. Paul Clarke, a teacher at P.S./I.S. 50 in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood, observes, "The men and women, boys and girls who share the building each day … make the community school work. We are the community school. We are the mystery beyond the sum of the parts."[20]

Critics sometimes express concern that extending the hours, services, and relationships of the school will result in a loss of instructional time. Experienced practitioners have come to a very different conclusion. Dianne D. Iverson, an education policy advisor for an elected official in Multnomah County, Oregon, explains, "As a former elementary school teacher for 15 years and local union president, I understand the barriers that teachers face each and every day. When I was a teacher, the item I wanted more than anything was time. Give me more time, and I can give you better results for kids. Community schools give teachers more time to teach and more time to build trusting relationships with students and their parents. Through the community school strategy, teachers have partners in the building who can take care of students' health needs; provide food for that empty stomach; address the need for eyeglasses, boots, warm coats. Partners can take care of the problems my students face, so that I can focus on building the relationship with the child and am able to teach my students to read."[21]

It may seem strange in this chaotic economic period to say that the community school movement is alive, well, and growing. Yet such chaos can give rise to collaborative concepts and a willingness to consider new solutions. Out of adversity comes action, and that action is directed toward helping children succeed in an increasingly difficult environment of higher poverty levels, less health insurance, more mental health problems, and a widening gap between social classes. The future is likely to bring more opportunities for the kinds of partnerships described in this article, as educators and policymakers alike discover that our society must create more responsive institutions that address children's academic and nonacademic needs. □

Endnotes

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21. Personal correspondence with Jane Quinn, August 17, 2006.