

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Case studies of what works

02

St. Paul
Minnesota



ST. PAUL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

In an East Side neighborhood in St. Paul, Minn., the school day is just getting started at Dayton's Bluff Elementary as students line up to receive a free breakfast, which is available to all students so no one will have to go to class hungry. Some students will visit the school dentist for a checkup before returning to class. Others may have an appointment with the school counselor to discuss family issues. The counseling is designed to be culturally sensitive and fitted to the students' needs. Meanwhile, at John A. Johnson Elementary, a student's mother is talking with a staff member in the family resource center. The family was facing eviction earlier that week, but the resource center was able to get the mother in touch with much-needed assistance and prevent her son from missing vital learning time and suffering the stress of a move. Later in the day, at the Saint Paul Music Academy, students will attend after-school programs while some of their parents and neighbors receive job counseling and training. By engaging children and improving the prospects of parents, these schools reap the benefits of a stronger, more stable community.

These are just a few examples of the work community schools are doing in St. Paul. Programs like these have been in place at several schools since the turn of the millennium, thanks to partnerships like the Wilder Foundation's Achievement Plus program, which works with the schools mentioned above. Partnerships like these have become a powerful source of social change in St. Paul, and are providing thousands of students with a top-notch education and a variety of remarkable learning opportunities every year. Moreover, the programs have empowered teachers to reach beyond the traditional confines of the schools' walls to improve the lives of their students, families and communities. For more on the Wilder Foundation's Achievement Plus program, see [bit.ly/1cztFL2](https://youtu.be/l3Kb5jWUrxs). View a Teacher's Perspective: (<https://youtu.be/l3Kb5jWUrxs>).

Wraparound Services and Support: A Very Unselfish Building

Tim Prescott went to John A. Johnson Elementary School in 2005 to teach the fifth grade. Prescott had started at another St. Paul magnet school, but was intrigued by the work John A. Johnson was doing on behalf of its students, families and staff. Since starting at Johnson, he's been able to verify everything he had heard. "The school is the center of this neighborhood," he says. "We are the hub, and we are the one-stop shop for what you need."

The community school programs are vital for a school like Johnson. Almost every student comes from an economically challenged family, so anything that can enrich the lives of the children and help their families provide stability and support makes a world of difference. The programs here strive to do just that. Families that sign up for dental care programs through the school don't have to worry about their children's dental needs while they are enrolled, and instead of a student missing a day of school (and a parent missing a day of work) they can have everything they need done on school grounds and lose only an hour or so of class time. On top of that, the school's family center is, as Prescott says, "top-notch." Providing after-school programs like tutoring and sports for students, professional development services for parents, and housing support for families, the family center ensures everyone gets the support and services they need to thrive.

"If we find out on Tuesday that a child's family is moving over the weekend," Prescott says, "the family center can usually work it out by Monday to keep the child in school." Whether there is an eviction issue or simply a need to relocate, the ability to keep children in the same school prevents unnecessary interruptions in a child's education (a problem especially endemic to children from low-income families) and helps promote the sense of community and support that John A. Johnson Elementary is striving to create.

Climate and Culture: "Responsible, Respectful and Safe"

That is both the motto that teachers and administrators at John A. Johnson try to live by and the values that they try to instill in students. Building a sense of community and providing support across the board are vital to the school's mission, and the various programs the school utilizes are designed to do just that. In addition to providing services and direct supports, the school works with a number of external partners to help give students a chance to broaden their horizons and form bonds with their community.

One such program, hosted by the local YMCA, sponsors a camping trip for the fifth-grade classes every December. For many students, the trip is a rare opportunity to get out of the classroom and away from the city. For the teachers, it's another chance to connect with their students and broaden the scope of what and how they can teach. The trip can be eye-opening and help teachers and students alike connect outside the confines of a classroom—over a campfire, hiking together or simply engaging in a communal meal.

Prescott recounted one trip where a student was puzzled over dinner, because he'd never heard of a taco with a hard shell: "It was just where he had come from. Tacos only came in soft shells. He didn't think tacos could have hard shells."

Of course, the trip works toward a more important lesson. Back at school, the students write thank-you letters to every-

one who made the camping trip possible, and talk about what they learned from the experience. More than just being an exercise in reflection, writing and composition, the letter-writing process is an opportunity to help reinforce an important school goal: build a strong community.

"You give back to the community, and that's important," Prescott explains. "We don't support the 'look out for yourself mentality,' you get sometimes. We teach that it's important to be respectful of others, and offer to give back to people who have helped you. That's how communities should work."

For more on John A. Johnson Elementary School's partnerships and programs, see <http://jaj.spps.org/>.

Supporting Teachers: Empowerment

The mentality of support doesn't solely extend to the community; The faculty at Johnson also make it a point of opening their doors to one another. It's one of Prescott's favorite things about teaching in a community school, where teachers are supportive and interested in their colleagues' successes, too, rather than focused primarily on taking care of themselves and their own classes.

It's a culture that flourishes in a school whose singular goal is building strong relationships and providing supports, and the teachers who choose to come on board and take on that mission will find themselves supported by their fellows. Even the administrators wear more than one hat—juggling relationships with partners, staff and families—but the outcomes are undeniable. Parent engagement can always be better, but every year the ties get a little stronger; and community schools aren't the only strategy St. Paul has engaged to bring schools and families closer together.

Union-Driven Solutions: Family Engagement and the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project

The work being done in St. Paul is an amazing example of a local union and its members coming together to provide teachers with the tools and resources they need to be effective educators.

Although the community schools were seeing an amazing turnout of parents and families coming in to receive services,

there was still a major gap between teachers and parents when it came to their children's academic success. So, a group of teachers got together and decided to take the conversation to the parents; the teachers petitioned to start their own home-visit project based on a model of home visiting used successfully in Sacramento and other urban districts for years. The district, however, was hesitant to embrace the idea. According to Saint Paul Federation of Teachers Vice President and home-visit advocate Nick Faber, the district didn't think money would be available to fund the project, and while the district was happy to give the teachers its permission to proceed, the expense of training and incentives to participate weren't something the district was interested in providing.

The teachers turned to the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) for help, and the union came through with grant money to get the program up and running. The funding was enough to bring in trainers and send several teachers to 15 students' homes over the course of the year, where teachers met with parents and began building relationships. Even though the number of visits that first year was small, the participants saw great breakthroughs in their interactions with parents and the way they viewed and related with their students.

"A child who might be shy in class would open up when you were on their own ground, where they were comfortable, and that was doubly true for parents," says Sarah Johnson, an early participant in the project and a current trainer for other teachers. "As teachers, we often expect parents to come out of their comfort zones and come to us. But if you make the effort to even meet them halfway, it's a win-win situation for everyone."

Though the participants reported the first year to be a resounding success, the St. Paul School District was still uninterested in funding the project. For the second year, the American Federation of Teachers helped the SPFT fund more trainings with more teachers and parents participating, it wasn't long until word got around and a significant number of teachers wanted to participate in the program.

"There are a lot of reasons teachers might be nervous about getting involved in this sort of thing, initially," Johnson says, thinking about her work training colleagues to participate in the program. "This kind of communication just isn't taught in most teacher prep programs. But when you

make it habit, it really changes how everyone views each other in very positive ways. If you don't partner with families, you are cheating kids out of a great education."

By 2012, the program had been running for the most part on union support for two years, so the SPFT decided to make funding for the program part of the collective bargaining agreement. After negotiations, the district consented to funding stipends to act as incentives for teachers taking on the additional responsibility of visiting students' parents in their homes. By this point, a number of local teachers and parents were ready to take over the task of training their colleagues, so the district would not have to pay to bring in any more special trainers, and the program could grow naturally. And grow it did.

Impacts of Home Visits: Growth and "Breaking Down Our Assumptions"

With the school district finally backing the educators' efforts to connect with parents in a meaningful way, the number of home visits made a massive jump—from 30 in the 2011-12 school year to 200 the following year. By the end of the 2013-14 school year, that number had more than doubled with over 500 visits made. By the winter break of 2014-15, an amazing 726 households had already been visited, putting the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project on course to double its reach once again.

Numbers alone don't tell the whole story, of course. What are parents and teachers getting out of the project? Well, according to Faber and other participants: quite a bit.

"At the end of the day," SPFT Vice President Faber says, "parents and teachers are the two groups who know their students best. There's a lot of desire out there to keep parents and teachers mad at each other when really they need to be in a relationship, working together. Community schools and [the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project] empowers that relationship."

Faber also points out that strong relationships and partnerships are vital both to school success and to a teacher's job satisfaction. Teachers who feel supported by parents are more "energized and feel more confident," he says, which in turn feeds into the success of their students, further strengthening the bonds the very first visit began to build. Seventy-six percent of teachers involved in the home-visit project recognized that visiting the homes of

their students and getting to know their families forced them to begin re-evaluating their assumptions about their students and families. Even a few such visits lead educators to begin “breaking down our assumptions,” Faber says, as well as identifying certain privileges and problems that might have hindered communications.

Advice from the Field: Don't Lose Momentum

The Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project has entered its fourth year and is at an all-time high for participation, even as the com-

munity school strategy enters its 15th year in St. Paul. Despite progress, Faber notes that one of the biggest pitfalls an educator faces when advocating for these programs is becoming complacent. Over the past 14 years, community schools in St. Paul have started to see dwindling investment in programs, and the attention and fervor once surrounding the plan have waned as the revolutionary ideals become the norm.

The biggest hurdle seems to be district support. Though principals, teachers and parents all remain invested in their programs and providing a top-quality education for all students, the district is hesitant to embrace

ideas that might require funding, regardless of their effectiveness. The recession and debates over public spending, coupled with cuts to public programs at all levels, may have contributed to this tight-fistedness, but luckily, in St. Paul at least, educators like Nick Faber, Sarah Johnson, and Tim Prescott have the backing of their union to make sure local schools can excel, not simply perform.

For more about community schools, visit the Coalition for Community Schools at (www.communityschools.org/) or the AFT at (www.aft.org/position/community-schools).

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