

A Coordinated Effort

Well-Conducted Partnerships Meet Students' Academic, Health, and Social Service Needs



BY MARTY BLANK, REUBEN JACOBSON, AND SARAH S. PEARSON

Teachers know that students' academic performance and progress depend on the environments in which they live and learn. Now it's time for the rest of us, citizens and policymakers, to see schools as the centers of communities. We must recognize that community problems,

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such as poverty, violence, family instability, and substance abuse, inevitably become student and school problems.

Without question, our schools must be accountable for students' performance. But just as surely, our schools can't meet students' needs alone. Young people need more connections, more support, more opportunities, and more learning time to be successful. They need everything their families, schools, and communities can give.

When supports and services aren't available, often it's the teachers who step in to fill the void. They do this because they have formed relationships with their students, and because they know that unmet needs impede learning. A teacher's primary responsibility is to educate students. However, any visitor to a school quickly recognizes that teachers have a number of additional demands on their time. For instance, teachers may counsel students, work with parents to develop better discipline strategies, make home visits, search for social services, and in some cases, administer medications. Many students (and their fami-

lies) desperately need this help, but they also need their teachers to devote their time and energy to teaching.

What to do? To us, the answer is clear: respond to the changing needs of students and families by investing in the development of community schools. These schools partner with a variety of youth development, health, and social services organizations to meet students' needs. In community schools, teachers get the supports they need to be able to teach, and students are better served by partners such as family support centers and medical and dental clinics that are literally just down the hall. At their best, community schools become true centers of their communities; open day and night, weekends and summers, there's plenty of time to deliver a strong academic program, extend the school day, support healthy youth development, and over the long term, bring people together to solve community problems.

Community schools have spread to localities across the country in part because they align the assets of students, families, educators, and the community around a common goal—improving the success of our young people.

Defining a Movement, One Community at a Time

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships. It is not just a school with a long list of programs (which all too often are uncoordinated and competing for resources); it is a strategy that integrates academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and civic engagement to improve student learning, develop stronger families, and create healthier communities.

Although each community school is heavily dependent on its unique community context, they all share the following core principles: fostering strong partnerships, sharing accountability for results, setting high expectations for all, building on the community's strengths, embracing diversity, and developing home-grown, sustainable solutions.

When a school becomes the hub of the community, families, local government, higher education institutions, businesses, community-based organizations, and local citizens all join with educators to ensure that:

- Children are ready to learn when they enter school and every day thereafter.
- All children and youth are engaged in rigorous academic experiences and enriching learning opportunities that help them see positive futures and achieve high standards.
- Students are healthy—physically, socially, and emotionally.
- Youth are prepared for adult roles in the workplace, as parents and as citizens.
- Families and neighborhoods are safe, supportive, and engaged.
- Parents and community members are involved with the school and their own lifelong learning.
- Students contribute to their communities by engaging in real-world problem solving as part of the core academic curriculum.

Each community school provides services tailored to meet the needs of its unique community, including everything from fam-

ily literacy nights to housing information to nutrition counseling to English as a second language classes to mental health services. It all depends on the students' and the community's particular strengths and needs.

How does all this get done, especially without burdening the teachers or the rest of the school staff? Through partnerships. Just because a service is offered inside or next to the school building doesn't mean it's run or even overseen by school staff. In working with community schools across the country, we've seen that successful, sustainable community schools very often have two key features: a "lead partner" agency and a community school coordinator. The lead partner agency is, simply, the organization that oversees the extracurricular aspects of the community school and connects educators to the community. So while the school is focusing on delivering a top-notch education, the lead partner agency is focusing on the wraparound services that enable students to be attentive, engaged learners.

Of course, the school and lead partner agency staff must communicate, especially to develop shared goals and exchange information on students' needs. And that brings us to the other key feature of a community school: the coordinator. A full-time site coordinator, often on the staff of the lead partner agency but sometimes on the school staff (depending on how grants and other funding sources come together), secures resources, finds additional partners, and coordinates services so they connect seamlessly around the school day. While one agency may serve as the lead partner to multiple schools, ideally each school will have its own coordinator. Often, the coordinator meets not only students' and families' needs, but teachers' needs too.

Supporting Teachers

What does a community school look like in practice? First, it looks like a school where teachers are free to teach and students are ready to learn. For example, when Maureen Simon, a prekindergarten and kindergarten teacher at Pleasant Ridge Montessori School in Cincinnati, Ohio, wanted to teach her students about their place in the larger community and about community outreach, she asked her community school coordinator to organize a visit to the local children's hospital. As she explains it, "When I decided I wanted to do the children's hospital project, ... my next thought was, 'When am I going to have time to set this up?' And then I thought, 'Oh! I can ask Angie [the coordinator] to help.'"¹

Of course, Angie Okuda is there to do more than just help with trips. Her role as a liaison to community resources is at the heart of how she serves both students and teachers. Here's how Simon puts it: "If I have concerns about a child, any kinds of concerns, I can go to her because there may be programs in that community that I'm not aware of, and she can tell me about them and help me point the family in the right direction."

Priscilla Copas, a third-grade teacher at Ethel M. Taylor Academy, also in Cincinnati, agrees that teaching in a community school—and especially having a coordinator—helps teachers in their academic mission. She describes an afterschool program at her school that offers tutoring and homework help. But unlike so many afterschool programs in which the tutors and teachers never speak with each other, in her school the coordinator ensures that the tutors are getting direction from the teachers and know just what each student needs to work on. Noting the

reduced pressure on her as a teacher, Copas also discusses the importance of the wraparound services her community school provides to students. She says, “Their health is better. When their health is better, they’re going to do better academically, ... and none of that is on my shoulders, someone is doing that for me.”²

For Copas, someone is also taking care of the basics, like buying school supplies that used to come out of her pocket. Copas’s class has been adopted by a local bank, which now provides not just supplies, but also funding for field trips and for snacks during testing week, and staff to read with the students and write them letters of support. These tangible benefits are great, but the intangible benefits may be even more important. Copas explains, “The kids, when they know those people are coming in, they just love it. They love the attention, they love ... [knowing somebody] cares about them.”

One more benefit—both tangible and intangible—that Copas notes is the increase in parent involvement, especially after the school hosted a very popular job fair that brought parents and other adults from the community inside the building. Copas

explains, “It’s really beneficial because the parents are less fearful ... of coming to school.... We have parents who come up and help out in the lunch room, ... and that wasn’t happening before.”

The work that community schools do with families and the community brings to life the concepts of family involvement and

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community engagement, and helps to build the social capital (i.e., social networks that strengthen communities’ ability to resolve their problems) that is so important to the development of our most vulnerable children.

One Idea, Many Models

Community schools come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes a single school recognizes that it must address all the needs of its children in order to be successful. Often there’s a systemwide initiative that has support at the district level and from essential community partners. Other times a national organization provides a design that schools across the country can adopt.

The field is much too broad and varied to describe fully here, but the following brief descriptions offer an overview of a handful of national, regional, and local initiatives. (For detailed descriptions of a few community school initiatives, see the articles on pages 8 and 37.)

Communities In Schools

Established 30 years ago to prevent students from dropping out of school, Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of 194 local affiliates in 27 states and the District of Columbia. CIS affiliates take on the lead partner role discussed in the main article. CIS provides a model with a core set of goals—which it calls the Five Basics—that each site pursues: “a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult, a safe place to learn and

grow, a healthy start and a healthy future, a marketable skill to use upon graduation, and a chance to give back to peers and community.”* At the same time, each site is unique in that the work revolves around assessing students’ needs and finding appropriate services.

So, for example, one site may provide mentors, dental exams, and drug and alcohol education, while another may provide help for teen parents, extended-hours programs, and career counseling. Yet another site may provide all of these things, and more. To learn more about CIS, visit: www.cisnet.org.

Children’s Aid Society

Founded in 1853, the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) has long served New York City’s disadvantaged children with a wide variety of programs. In partnership with the city’s school district, it began developing community schools

in 1992 and now serves as the lead partner in 21 New York City community schools. In addition, it is expanding to assist schools nationally (and internationally) through its National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools.



*Drawn from the Communities In Schools home page: www.cisnet.org.

Seeing Results

Community schools have spread across the country in the past few decades simply because they make sense. Only in the last several years, as the whole education sector has become more accountability focused, has there been a major push to gather data on community schools. We expect that in the next few years more and better data will be available. For example, the national organization Communities In Schools (CIS) is in the middle of a five-year, nationwide study in which outcomes in schools that faithfully implement the CIS model are being compared with those in schools that do not faithfully implement the CIS model and to demographically similar traditional (noncommunity) schools.³

Despite the relatively recent push to quantify their results, community schools currently do have a promising body of research that reveals a range of positive academic, health, and social outcomes. Broadly speaking, when community school initiatives are well executed, students show significant gains in academic achievement and in important nonacademic areas. In addition, families of community school students show increased family stability, communication with teachers, school involvement, and sense of responsibility for their children's learning. Community schools enjoy stronger parent-teacher relationships,

increased teacher satisfaction, a more positive school environment, and greater community support. The community school strategy also promotes more efficient use of school buildings.⁴

Now let's turn to the specifics. The following is not a comprehensive look at the research on community schools. Rather, it is intended to show the positive impact that well-run community schools can have.

Improved Academic Performance in Reading and Math

Preliminary results from the national evaluation of Communities In Schools indicate that schools that faithfully implement the CIS model show greater gains than matched non-CIS schools in graduation rates, and reading and math scores. More specifically, the well-developed* CIS schools showed net gains over their matched comparison schools of 4.8 percent in graduation rates, 5.2 percent in grade 4 math achievement, 2.3 percent in grade 4 reading achievement, 6.0 percent in grade 8 math achievement, and 5.1 percent in grade 8 reading achievement.

The 150 schools in the Chicago Community Schools Initiative (CSI) have delivered standardized test results from 2001 to 2006

*The study refers to these schools as the "high implementers," meaning that they had the vast majority of the CIS model components in place.

The CAS model provides expanded educational, health, social, and recreational services through: educational enrichment programs (like chess and art classes) offered before and after school, and during weekends and summers; medical, dental, mental health, and social services; parent involvement and adult education programs; early childhood education; and events designed for the whole community. Learn more about CAS at: www.childrensaidsociety.org/communityschools.

SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Community Schools

With 54 SUN community schools in six school districts, Multnomah County, Oregon, has created a regional approach to providing educational, recreational, social, and health services. SUN community schools are a collaboration of the Multnomah County Department of Human Services, the City of Portland Parks and Recreation, various nonprofits, and local school districts. SUN community schools seek to unite the neighborhood by extending the school day and serving as a community "hub." Extended-day academic and enrichment programs are linked with the school day, and include family involvement and strengthening programs; health and social services for students, families, and community

members; community events; and adult education classes. Direct services are supported by partnerships with other community institutions, such as libraries, parks and community centers, neighborhood health clinics, area churches, and businesses. Learn more about SUN schools at: www.sunschools.org.

Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative

The Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative is another regional approach, serving elementary schools in two districts. A project of Tulsa's Metropolitan Human Services Commission, it is coordinated and supported by the Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa, a nonprofit, citizen-led United Way agency. The initiative has a strong health component through a partnership with the Oklahoma University at Tulsa Health Sciences Center. Working groups focus on early childhood, health and health education, mental health and social services, family and community engagement, youth development, out-of-school time, neighborhood development, and lifelong learning. To learn more, visit: www.csctulsa.org/community_schools.htm.

Chicago Community Schools Initiative

Almost a decade ago, a group of Chicago's business and philanthropic

leaders began working with then-superintendent (now U.S. secretary of education) Arne Duncan to create "full-service" schools that would meet students' educational, developmental, and health needs. Today, Chicago has over 150 community schools, each of which has joined with a lead partner agency that has at least three years of experience in adult and youth programming. These schools offer a range of voluntary afterschool and weekend programming for students, including a mix of sports and recreation, arts and cultural activities, tutoring, and academic enrichment. Funding is leveraged among the partnership to provide for additional services, including on-site medical and dental care. Read more at: www.annenberginstitute.org/Idea/Chicago.php.

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These descriptions of community school models demonstrate that there are many different types of community schools, each uniquely tailored to address the specific needs of the students, teachers, families, and community. You may recognize some of what these community schools do in your own school. If so, your school is on its way to becoming a community hub that meets the needs of its students.

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that show a steady closing of the achievement gap with other Chicago public schools.⁵ While all schools showed improvement, CSI schools improved close to 8 percentage points more than non-CSI schools in both reading and math standardized achievement tests.

In New York City, students participating in afterschool programs in the Children's Aid Society's community schools from 2004–2007 scored significantly higher on their math tests than students who didn't participate in the afterschool program. In 2006–2007, 42.1 percent of students who spent 60 percent or more of their afterschool time in CAS afterschool activities met the Level 3 standard (proficient) on the state math test.⁶

A study of community schools in San Mateo County, California, found that the county's most seasoned community schools improved their Academic Performance Index (API) scores from

increases in elementary, middle, and high school attendance for community schools over their matched comparison group.⁹

- In Iowa, the Eisenhower Full-Service Community School model demonstrated a significant reduction in absences for participants compared with nonparticipants.¹⁰
- The Netter Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia reported that CCP partner schools University City High School and Ecotech had average daily attendance rates of 79 percent and 87 percent, respectively, much better than the city-wide high school average of 65 percent.¹¹
- A study of Communities In Schools indicates that the CIS strategy keeps students in school, and that CIS is the only



Well-developed CIS schools showed net gains over comparison schools of 6 percent in grade 8 math achievement, and 5 percent in grade 8 reading achievement.

the 2002–03 school year to the 2006–07 school year. Comparing results from the 2005–06 and 2006–07 school years, student participation in extended-day activities, student and/or parent participation in mental health services, and parent participation in school programs and activities were all associated with higher scores in 2006–07 on the state assessment. Specifically, 35 percent of youth who participated in extended-day activities moved into a higher achievement level (e.g., from below basic to basic) on the state's English language arts test, while only 26 percent of nonparticipants improved. Over 36 percent of participants moved into a higher achievement level on the state's math test, while only 23 percent of nonparticipants improved. Thirty-eight percent of students who accessed mental health services and/or whose families accessed mental health services moved into a higher achievement level on the state's math test, while just 26 percent improved if neither they nor their families accessed services.⁷

Increased Attendance and Decreased Dropout Rates

Community schools can have a significant impact on increasing attendance and decreasing the dropout rate.

- Students in the Children's Aid Society's community schools who have participated in CAS afterschool programs have better school attendance than students who have not participated.⁸
- Communities In Schools (nationwide) found small net

dropout prevention program in the country to demonstrate, with a high standard of evidence, that it increases both graduation rates and the percentage of students who graduate on time with a regular diploma.¹²

Improved Behavior and Youth Development

Several studies have found beneficial shifts in the actions, attitudes, interests, motivations, and relationships of children and youth who attend a community school. For instance, between 2002 and 2006 Chicago Community Schools Initiative students consistently demonstrated significantly lower numbers of serious disciplinary incidents, compared with schools with similar demographics.¹³ In addition, a study of the Children's Aid Society's community schools found significant increases for all surveyed students in self-esteem and career/other aspirations, and decreased reports of problems with communication across all three study years.¹⁴

Greater Parent Involvement

When families are supported in their parenting role, involvement in their children's learning increases and student performance is strengthened. Consistent parental involvement at home and school, at every grade level and throughout the year, is important for students' sustained academic success.¹⁵ Studies have found that parents of community school students are more engaged in their children's learning and are more involved in their school. In the study of San Mateo County's community schools, parent skills

and capacities saw statistically significant improvements. Survey results show that 93 percent of parents attended parent-teacher conferences and high percentages of parents encouraged their children to complete their homework, talked to them about school, and used everyday activities to teach them.¹⁶

Parents who receive services from the community school that their children attend may be more likely to be engaged in their children's education. For example, at Carlin Springs Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, 95 percent of the adults taking ESL classes in which they learned about the school system attended their parent-teacher conferences.¹⁷

Increased Community Benefits

Community schools promote better use of school buildings and, as a result, neighborhoods enjoy increased security, heightened



community pride, and better rapport among students and residents. Benefits to families (such as increased physical, economic, and emotional stability) contribute to the stability of their communities. So do more and better relationships among community agencies, businesses, and civic organizations, which also leads to greater awareness of the services they offer.¹⁸

For example, the United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley (UWGLV) launched its ambitious Community Partners for Student Success Community Schools Initiative in 2005. The Lehigh Valley, located between Philadelphia and New York City, is composed of three major urban hubs, various suburbs, and pockets of rural communities. The community schools initiative is a team effort of individuals committed to helping students graduate from high school ready to lead meaningful and productive lives. This approach is consistent with the underlying goals of the United Way of America and serves as a vehicle for addressing critical concerns in Lehigh Valley, such as an alarmingly high dropout rate and an enduring disconnect between the community and public schools.

Believing that schools need the support of an engaged community to address these challenges, UWGLV staff work to build relationships among those who have a stake in, and care for, the health of youth and families in the community. As Susan Gilmore, president of UWGLV, explains, "We're not single-issue focused, we're community focused. It's not just about children and youth, it's about adults, families, and the neighborhood. Our reputation is around work that supports the community as a whole."¹⁹

UWGLV's broad array of partners supports that claim. Its community school initiative engages the business community, medical clinics or linked health care services, family centers, preschools and daycares, comprehensive afterschool programs, and community service programs through local colleges and other partners.

Initiatives do not have to be so ambitious to be worthwhile. In Chicago, Burroughs Elementary School and its community partner, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, provide programming to students who already have graduated from the school, recognizing that they are an important resource to the rest of the community. The school and the neighborhood council asked the community what they wanted and now offer programming for parents ranging from GED and English as a second language classes to cooking and yoga classes. They also started program-

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ming for neighborhood youth this year, including leadership, art, and dance classes.

Converting Your School into a Community School

With all their other responsibilities, teachers may wonder what role they play in organizing community schools. Here are a few suggestions for teachers who would like to turn their school into a community school:

1. Know the partners who are present in your school so you can take advantage of the services and supports they provide. Encourage the development of a plan for how these organizations can work more effectively with teachers.
2. Get to know the neighborhood around your school. Community partner organizations can help you do this. Teachers can make home visits, walk the neighborhood, connect with afterschool programs at the school and in the community, and participate in school and community events.
3. Advocate for a community school coordinator in your building. The coordinator's job is to build the bridges to the community, government agencies, parents, funders, and other partners.
4. Encourage your local union officers and building representatives to look at how community schools might make

teachers more effective and make their daily professional lives more manageable.

The Coalition for Community Schools and its partners have a number of resources to help teachers, principals, parents, and community members start a community school. (For a quick look at some of those resources, see the box below.) The resources section of the coalition's Web site* has a toolkit that contains all the information you need to create a community school, as well as a list of partner organizations that can provide technical assistance.

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In *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools*, the Coalition for Community Schools found three advantages that community schools have over schools that act alone. Community schools can:

- Garner additional resources and reduce the demands on school staff.
- Provide learning opportunities that develop both academic and nonacademic competencies.
- Build social capital—the networks and relationships that support learning and create opportunity for young people while strengthening their communities.

The community school movement is growing as these advantages become more broadly recognized and more necessary in our troubling economic times. Together, we can create the partnerships and resources that are necessary to ensure that all our students receive the comprehensive education they require. □

Endnotes

1. Interview by Reuben Jacobson on January 23, 2009.
2. Interview by Reuben Jacobson on January 23, 2009.
3. To learn more about the national evaluation, go to www.cisnet.org/about/NationalEvaluation/Normal.asp.
4. Martin J. Blank, Atelia Melaville, and Bela P. Shah, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, 2003).
5. Samuel P. Whalen, *Three Years into Chicago's Community Schools Initiative (CSI): Progress, Challenges, and Emerging Lessons* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, 2007).
6. Kira Krenichyn, Helene Clark, and Lymari Benitez, *Children's Aid Society 21st Century Community Learning Centers After-School Programs at Six Middle Schools: Final Report of a Three-Year Evaluation, 2004–2007* (New York: ActKnowledge, 2008).
7. LaFrance Associates, LLC, *First Report of Findings: Multi-Site Evaluation of San Mateo County Community Schools* (prepared for Silicon Valley Community Foundation, June 2008).
8. Krenichyn, Clark, and Benitez, *Children's Aid Society*.
9. Caliber, *Communities In Schools National Evaluation School-Level Report: Summary of Findings* (prepared for Communities in Schools, April 2008). Communities in Schools found net increases of 0.2 percent in elementary, 0.1 percent in middle, and 0.3 percent in high school for high-implementing community schools over their matched comparison group.
10. LaFrance Associates, LLC, *Comprehensive Evaluation of the Full-Service Community Schools Model in Iowa: Harding Middle School and Moulton Extended Learning Center* (San Francisco: Author, 2005).
11. *Catalyzing School Reform: The University-Assisted Community School Approach* (submitted to the Netter Foundation, University of Pennsylvania Center for Campus-Community Partnerships, October 2007).
12. Whalen, *Three Years*.
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14. Krenichyn, Clark, and Benitez, *Children's Aid Society*.
15. Blank, Melaville, and Shah, *Making the Difference*.
16. LaFrance Associates, *First Report of Findings*.
17. Coalition for Community Schools, *Carlin Springs Elementary School, School Award Winner, 2007* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, 2007).
18. Blank, Melaville, and Shah, *Making the Difference*.
19. Sarah S. Pearson, *Community Schools: The United Way* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, 2008), 1.

Establishing Your Community School

Transforming your school into a community school may seem overwhelming; fortunately, many excellent resources are available online. The reports and Web sites highlighted here cover the major issues of planning, funding, evaluating, and sustaining community schools. As the main article explains, educators should start by partnering with a community organization that will take the lead in securing funding and coordinating services.

Growing Community Schools: The Role of Cross-Boundary Leadership examines the development of community schools in 11 cities. Ranging from the Tukwila School District in Washington (with just over 2,000 students) to the Chicago Public Schools (with more than 400,000 students), these communities have differing needs and resources. Nonetheless, they've all brought the community school idea to scale so that students are served citywide.

www.communityschools.org/CCSDocuments/GrowingCommunitySchools.pdf

Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works offers six keys to community engagement. These keys, based on interviews and focus groups with dozens of principals from community schools, are then applied in detailed discussions of how to engage families, staff, partners, and the public. www.communityschools.org/CCSDocuments/CommunityAndFamilyEngagement.pdf

The Basics: Building, Assessing, Sustaining, and Improving Community Schools assists staff at school and community organizations with implementation. It reviews the stages of community school development and provides all the meeting agendas, presentations, and planning activities needed for eight workshops, from initial collaboration to lessons learned. <http://johnwgardnertestsites.pbworks.com>

The Coalition for Community Schools offers a wide array of resources,

including a toolkit with guidance on everything from planning, funding, and facilities to evaluation and sustainability. It also has links to state affiliates and organizations that provide technical assistance.

www.communityschools.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=11&Itemid=33

The Finance Project, a nonprofit that aims to help leaders “finance and sustain initiatives to build better futures for children, families, and communities,” offers many useful publications that are applicable to the development of community schools. Its Children and Family Services publications provide research on the costs and benefits of various services (including recent reports on out-of-school-time programs and mentoring), as well as guides on planning, funding, and implementation. www.financeproject.org/all_pubs.cfm?cat=3&p=1



*Visit the Coalition for Community Schools online at www.communityschools.org.