

Mutual Support

The Community Schools Strategy

Schools of all sizes and shapes are challenged by students' diverse and complex needs.

Community partners and integrated services can help schools support students and families.

When students' needs are met, teachers can focus on academics, graduation, and postsecondary opportunities.

Students learn best when their physical, mental, emotional, and other needs are met, but schools rarely have the time and resources available to meet those needs. If schools can find a way to engage families and communities, students are more likely to succeed. But how?

One answer is the community schools strategy. A community school has a set of partnerships in place that connect the school, the students' families, and the community. Community schools are more than just another model or program; they bring together community partners, parents, teachers, and administrators to assess students' needs and identify the resources that are available to meet them.

Community schools have an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development. They address those areas by creating the structure and culture needed to ensure that the conditions for learning are fulfilled, including:

- A core instructional program that is delivered by qualified teachers and is organized around a challenging curriculum and high standards and expectations for students
- Student engagement and motivation—in school and community settings—before, during, and after school and during the summer
- Recognition of the basic physical, mental, and emotional health needs of young people and their families and commitment to addressing those needs
- Mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families, and school staff members
- Community engagement, together with school efforts, that promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and that connects students to a broader learning community.

Discussion guide available at www.nassp.org/pldiscuss1011



Community schools work with their partners to develop a climate that is welcoming to families and students. Such schools acknowledge that students have varying academic and nonacademic needs and connect students to supports that meet those needs. A school site team coordinates and aligns partnerships toward the vision and results. Ideally, the work of the community partners is incorporated into the school improvement plan.

Without question, the support of the principal is key to the success of community schools. A principal must acknowledge that his or her school belongs to the greater community and welcome the resources that partners can offer when those resources are aligned with the school's mission and goals. And those goals should go beyond the academic development of students to incorporate other aspects of a young person's development: health, social and emotional growth, and civic responsibility. According to John Welch, the superintendent of the Puget Sound Educational Service District in Washington State, "Principals have to see community schools as something that will help them bring their vision to life."

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School Bronx, NY

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School was founded in 1994 as one of the first small high schools in the Bronx. Principal Nancy Mann knew that her students would need additional support to succeed. "There was no social service infrastructure in the neighborhood, yet the need was so great," she said. In 2005, she reached out to the Children's Aid Society (CAS), a large community service organization, to obtain additional services. A research study by Parthenon on overage/under-credited students showed that Fannie Lou has one of the highest graduation rates for students who enter high school at the lowest levels of proficiency. In addition, 70%–80% of graduates go on to college each year (NYC Department of Education, n.d.a, n.d.b).

Fannie Lou's curriculum emphasizes the development of research, problem-solving, and communication skills. The interdisciplinary curricula for grades 9 and 10 include a community service placement, and the curricula for grades 11 and 12 focus on discipline-based college preparation. Students benefit from the involvement of advisers who guide them through their academic requirements, provide

connections between the school day and after-school learning, and reach out to parents.

CAS is the school's lead partner in offering out-of-school enrichment activities, facilitating family engagement, providing supports to students and their families, and linking full medical and dental services to the school. In addition, many students in grades 11 or 12 receive career skills training through a partnership with the School of Cooperative Technical Education, part of the NYC Department of Education.

Fannie Lou students and their families receive comprehensive physical, dental, and mental health services through the nearby CAS Bronx Family Center. In addition, CAS makes a health educator available at Fannie Lou to counsel students; in their morning advisory periods, students learn about such topics as pregnancy prevention. School-based social workers provide mental health and crisis intervention services. And when a student's family faces eviction, staff members can help obtain emergency relief.

"Through our Children's Aid partnership, the teachers are less likely to feel helpless or hopeless," said Mann. "They know the students are being taken care of, so we can get back to academics. This is crucial."

Oyler School Cincinnati, OH

As an elementary school serving a poverty-stricken industrial neighborhood, Oyler Elementary had seen fewer than 15% of its students make it to grade 10. In 2002, as Oyler faced the threat of closure, parents, local businesses, and nonprofit organizations convinced the school board that a K–12 configuration was more likely to enable students to graduate. Those family and community members partnered with Cincinnati Public Schools to transform Oyler Elementary into a community learning center that now serves 700 students in grades K–12. In 2010, 82% of seniors graduated; of those, 32% were the first in their family to enter college (Kenning, 2011).

In the last three years, Oyler's high school program has graduated more students in the neighborhood than in the previous 85 years combined. Before Oyler became a community school that served grades K–12, there was no high school in the neighborhood, so many local children did not even go on to high school after they finished grade 8 at



Oyler, let alone graduate.

Craig Hockenberry, the principal of Oyler for the last 13 years, said that the strategy called for, first, determining the biggest challenges Oyler's students faced and, second, finding partners in the community who commanded the resources to address those challenges. Lack of mental and primary health care topped the list. The school now partners with St. Aloysius Orphanage, a social service agency, which provides a team of on-site mental health professionals and a supervising physician. Located within the school is a comprehensive health clinic operated by the Cincinnati Health Department that provides health, dental, and vision care for all students.

Pivotal to the school's success has been a full-time resource coordinator whose position is funded through Cincinnati Public Schools' Community Learning Center Institute. The institute and the local YWCA operate after-school and evening programs for students and adults, including a teen center, which is open from 2:00 to 7:00 p.m. Staff members from the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative help students prepare for college. Oyler also offers an online program for youth who have dropped out or who need an alternative schedule to graduate. The students move at their own speed with the assistance of Oyler faculty members and the support services provided by the school's many colocated partners. More than 400 volunteers visit Oyler weekly to provide individualized tutoring and mentoring.

According to the principal, the results are obvious. "We spent almost eight years in academic emergency. Once we started building partnerships, we slowly merged into academic watch. Last year, we moved into continuous improvement," said Hockenberry. Before they brought outside providers into the school, Hockenberry and his teachers had spent considerable time addressing problems associated with the lack of care. "Now we can focus more time on academics while our partners spend time on what they specialize in," he said.

As the school district completes its multimillion-dollar renovation, new partnerships are emerging, such as an early childhood center to be operated by Cincinnati Early Learning Centers. Hockenberry, the community school coordinator, and the community partners hope that the coordinated supports for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their parents will help prepare young people to learn. "In the end,"

Resources

Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works. A. C. Berg, A. Melaville, & M. J. Blank. 2006. www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CommunityAndFamilyEngagement.pdf

The Community Schools Approach: Raising Graduation and College Going Rates—Community High School Case Studies. R. Axelroth. 2009. www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/HighSchools_CS.pdf

Growing Community Schools: The Role of Cross-Boundary Leadership. M. J. Blank. 2006. www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Growing_COMM_Schools.pdf

Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships: The Community School Strategy [Systems web guide]. Coalition for Community Schools. 2011. www.communityschools.org/scalingup

said Hockenberry, "it's about a shared vision for the betterment of our kids."

Glenclyff High School Nashville, TN

Facing a number of challenges that included low promotion rates and discipline problems, Glenclyff High School in Nashville, TN, implemented a community schools strategy four years ago. The strategy focuses on aligning curriculum and instruction with the supports students need. To that end, the school formed partnerships with businesses and community-based organizations to provide programs for students through career academies.

But the school climate demanded broader supports in the form of daily advising time to help students develop counseling relationships for their four years in high school. And beyond the advisory curriculum and its whole-child supports in the areas of conflict resolution, communication skills, study skills, and time management, students were showing signs of gang violence and poor health. In response, the school organized the Glenclyff Community Coalition, which created a framework to address students' health needs. Glenclyff and community partners initiated a comprehensive wellness program that includes an on-site community clinic that serves 1,000 patients annually. In addition, Glenclyff and Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt operate the largest school garden in Nashville.

Today, Glenclyff is the hub of the community because of its wide range of programming. Most of



all, it is a place that focuses on the whole student by delivering a wide range of services that, although perhaps available in the greater community, would be not readily accessible to students and their families. At Glenclyff, each student is challenged, supported, and prepared for life after high school. Glenclyff recently was awarded the Coalition for Community School's National Award for Excellence, which recognizes outstanding community schools for achieving results for students, families, and communities.

Glenclyff has increased its graduation rate from 66.4% to 81.2% between 2007 and 2010. Former Executive Principal Tony Majors said, "We were a traditional inner-city high school. We had all the gangs that you hear about in inner-city schools. We're high poverty, over 80%. We're highly transient.... We had low academic performance. We had negative influences.... That started our community revitalization project. We felt that it is the right thing to do."

Developing a Community School

Despite the time and resources it takes, building a community school is a sound investment. Principals can use the following steps to begin the process:

- Explore with existing and new community partners how to deepen a culture of collective trust and work together more effectively to attain common goals. Try to make this an ongoing problem-solving group and include teachers, other staff members, and parents.
- Look at data beyond test scores to see how your students are doing. Are they attending school? How are their health and family circumstances? Are they isolated or do they have social supports? Think about how community partners can help address those challenges.
- Find a person to coordinate the work of community partners with the school. This is an excellent investment because community schools leverage at least three dollars in services for every dollar put in by the school. Or ask a community partner whether they would like to play this key role—in many community schools, community partners coordinate services.
- Demonstrate the importance of family and community engagement to your staff members by having them identify students' needs, walk around in the neighborhoods served by the school, do home visits, and participate in profes-

sional development that focuses on family and community engagement.

- Visit an existing community school to see how school leaders there are making it work.
- Encourage your superintendent to bring together community partners at the district level to support your efforts.
- Investigate the steps to scaling up and learn about the experiences of other communities in the Coalition for Community School's online guide *Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships* (www.communityschools.org/resources/systems_guide/index.aspx).

Everyone in schools is being asked to do more, without more time and with fewer resources, but there is no silver bullet to turning around schools. Leaders must act on a number of fronts to help students succeed (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). The community schools strategy helps principals use collaborative efforts to meet the needs of their students, families, and communities and to lead their schools to success. As Fannie Lou Principal Mann said, "The impact of poverty is tremendous, and it is highly disregarded in current school reform efforts. When we focus on the whole child and remove obstacles, students can better concentrate on learning." **PL**

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