

Double Duty: Schools as Community Centers

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Does the Obama administration's strategy really work?

By Kevin Butler
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When the bell rings at the end of the school day, many elementary students in Rosa Parks School in Portland, Ore., go to the local Boys and Girls Club to receive homework help and take part in fun activities. They don't have to travel far to get there. That's because the Boys and Girls Club of Portland Metropolitan Area, which also serves neighborhood kids who don't go to Rosa Parks, is located in the same building as the school, the result of a partnership between Portland Public Schools and the local Boys and Girls Club.

It's these kinds of partnerships between schools and government and nonprofit agencies that the Obama administration is hoping to foster. President Obama and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan have been pushing for "community schools," which offer facilities and programs outside regular school hours, typically in partnerships with nonprofit or city agencies.

These programs can include adult classes, after-school activities, student tutoring and even medical care. The administration redesigned the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which received nearly \$1.2 billion in fiscal year 2010. This program helps create community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities, such as math and literacy help to students, during non-school hours, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools.



Gary Wilson Photos/Graphic and Dull Olson Weekes Architects

The administration's push for community schools is being helped by the realization on the part of an increasing number of school districts that the approach has financial, as well as social and educational, benefits.

Research shows that for every dollar a school system spends on such partnerships, it sees a return of four dollars in the value of the services the district receives, says Martin Blank, director of the Coalition for Community Schools. "We are seeing more interest in this model because of the efficiencies it offers," Blank says.

Although there are many versions of community schools, Blank estimates there are 3,000 to 5,000 such schools nationally that generally meet the criteria. The community school concept, sometimes called extended learning time (ELT), is gaining traction among educators and policy-makers as a "potent school improvement strategy," according to "Expanded Time, Enriching Experiences," a report released in February by the Center for American Progress.

ELT schools provide academics and enrichment instruction to students, professional development to teachers, mental and physical health services to students, and outreach to parents. "In short, ELT has enabled many schools and their partners to collaborate more intensively and more strategically than they did when the schools were operating on a traditional school schedule," the report states.

Revamping the School Model

Mound Fort Junior High School in the Ogden (Utah) School District is transforming into a community school with the help of a \$2.5 million community schools federal grant. The SCOPE program, or Schools and Community in Ogden Partnering for Excellence, is a full-service community school that provides services for the junior high school and the community. Some programs cater to the community, such as the Head Start program, while other programs, such as an after-school program, cater only to the students.



At the Rosa Parks School in Portland, Ore. students don't have to go far to get to the Boys and Girls Club of Portland, which is connected to the school building.

Since October 2008, the 750-student, low-income school has established four Head Start classes and has expanded its existing student tutoring program, which it provides in conjunction with a local YMCA and local university student volunteers, says Luis Lopez, coordinator of the community school project.

The school, which serves many Latino students, added a mental health counselor and offers ESL and Spanish-language GED classes for adults three nights a week, with child care provided during those hours.

Mound Fort also partnered with community groups, including seniors at nearby Weaver State University, to hold a health fair last fall that offered free physical exams, dental and vision screening, glucose testing and even massage therapy to community members and

students. Future plans include providing adult classes in computers and citizenship, and partnering with a university or legal organization to provide pro bono legal help in areas like immigration.

The aim of a community school is to marshal community resources and support parental involvement, Lopez says. "What we are trying to do is to address external needs that students and families may have [and] to fulfill those needs so that kids can achieve academically," says Lopez, whose district is located about 35 miles north of Salt Lake City.

Joining with a City

Wake County (N.C.) Public Schools has partnered with four different cities to create five community centers, which have all opened within the past five years. When the district aims to build a new school, it approaches the municipality to see if it sees any recreational needs that would make it interested in partnering with the district, says Zackery Davis, the district's joint-use administrator.

In the early 2000s, an area of land in the city of Raleigh was slated for residential development. Seeing the need for a new school and recreation center to serve the new residents, the city and district jointly purchased about 20 acres of land.

After reaching a local development agreement in 2003 stating where the monies would come from and what the two agencies wished to have, the city and district jointly designed the project, which opened three years later and



An architect's renderings of the area around the Rosa Parks School in Portland and the local Boys and Girls Club, which are next to the New Columbia housing project.

consisted of a new school—Brier Creek Elementary— with a community center attached. It was a win-win arrangement, Davis says.

The district's elementary schools typically don't have gyms, but instead have multipurpose rooms where students can take part in recreational activities. With the partnership, the school gained a gym with basketball nets and other spaces for athletics. The city, in turn, gained a community center, which is open past school hours. It hosts youth basketball leagues and offers a weight room and adult activities like table tennis, as well as senior activities.

The city staffs the community center and runs licensed child care programs before and after school. Brier Creek is a year-round, multitrack school, meaning some students at any one time are in school while the others are "track-out," or on vacation. Those child-care programs offer activities during the day for the "track-out" students to give them something to do on vacation.

Sharing the Costs

Both the city of Raleigh and the Wake County district shared in the construction of the community center attached to the school. Like with other joint partnerships, the city paid the additional costs associated with the joint use above that which the district would have paid during the normal course of building a school. In other words, the city paid for expenses such as extra square footage, parking and lighting beyond that which the school would have built had it not partnered with the city. So the district pays only the cost associated with the school itself, Davis explains.

In the case of Brier Creek, the district contributed the money it would have spent building a multipurpose room, Davis says. The district also paid for the portion of the costs to construct a P.E. office and storage room inside the community center that the school uses.

The project cost \$17 million to construct, \$3.2 million of which came from the city. The two agencies share utility costs based on square footage. Davis says it's important for representatives of the city and school to discuss facility-related issues like scheduling. The "three Cs"—collaboration, cooperation and communication—are "the key to the success of any joint use," he adds.

Financial Synergies

As for the Rosa Parks School, the district's partnerships with the Boys and Girls Club and the city's housing and recreation departments solved a major problem, says Doug Capps, senior project manager and manager of community and government relations for Portland Public Schools.

In the early 2000s, the city was preparing to tear down dilapidated public housing and replace it with new and more numerous housing units in a residential project called New Columbia. But the nearby school was too small to serve the residents who would reside in the units.

At a time of declining district enrollment and state education budget cuts, the partnerships helped the district afford Rosa Parks School, which opened in the 2006- 2007 academic year, the same period in which much of the housing project's units were first made available. The Portland Housing Authority offered to provide the district part of the land, at no cost, in the New Columbia project for a new school and donated \$1 million toward construction costs.



The city of Portland bought the district property that hosted the small, original school building, taking it off the district's hands. And the Parks and Recreation Department had already been planning to build a new gymnasium at the site, which the agency agreed to let the school use.

At Brier Creek Elementary School in the Wake County (N.C.) Public Schools, mothers and their young children share music class.

The Boys and Girls Club, which held a fundraiser with the help of the district and the other partners in the project, also shared the construction costs. The district took on about \$9 million in debt for the project, about half the amount it would have had to carry without the money-saving partnerships, Capps says. "The district clearly was going to have to spend money to do something to accommodate the [additional] kids somewhere," Capps says. "And if you could get a new school out of the deal for about 50 cents on the dollar, what's wrong with that?"

Like Rosa Parks, John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School, which is part of Saint Paul (Minn.) Public Schools, has a youth services nonprofit attached to the school, in Johnson's case a YMCA, which provides after-school activities to students and also serves the general public.

But Johnson goes beyond that by partnering with other organizations to offer a medical clinic on-site two days a week, a center connecting needy families with housing and clothing, and help for adults to job search and practice interviewing, says Melissa Lehmann, principal of the 10-year-old school.

Coordinating It All

Cincinnati Public Schools' 10-year, \$1 billion Facilities Master Plan—slated to be completed in about three years—includes the community school concept, in which schools partner with outside organizations to offer services in school facilities. Partners at each school of staff, parents, volunteers and nonprofits, who are chosen by a committee, can include social service agencies, mental health organizations and after-school providers.



At the Ethel M. Taylor Academy in the Cincinnati Public Schools, students take after-school drum class as part of the school's partnership with outside organizations to provide services.

Cincinnati's Ethel M. Taylor Academy, a 450-student, pre-K5 school, has partnered with a variety of outside organizations to provide services, including a nonprofit that delivers psychotherapy to students on-site and another, Central Clinic, that offers after-school enrichment activities until 6 p.m. The school makes its computer lab available for adults and holds parent enrichment classes.

A Central Clinic employee works at the school full-time as the resource coordinator, interfacing between the school staff and the partners. Blank believes it's critical to have a resources coordinator to help manage—and expand—partnerships.

Embracing the community school model requires commitment among various organizations to work closely together to support student learning, he says.

"The most important thing," Blank continues, "is community leadership— leadership that recognizes that children need a more comprehensive approach to education, that if we really are going to educate all of our children to a higher standard, you have to pay attention to their academic, social and emotional needs."