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It Takes a Community: The Secret to Fixing Our Nation's Schools

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With education topping his agenda, President Obama sent a powerful message during last month's State of the Union address: No school is an island. "Education," Obama said, "begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities."

"We know what's possible for our children," he continued, "when reform isn't just a top-down mandate, but the work of local teachers and principals, school boards and communities."

As someone who's fought for community-based schools for more than two decades, I couldn't agree more.

The President's words were a great start, but there is more to the message. Had he devoted more of his speech to education, here's what the President might have said:

Yes, a rigorous education coupled with family and community supports are key to educating all of our children. No one can dispute the power of great teachers and an engaging curriculum, accompanied by afterschool enrichment, wraparound health and social services, real family involvement and the chance for students to contribute to their communities. We can and we must work to educate the whole child -- and impact the whole family -- particularly those from underserved communities.

I know that our schools cannot do this alone. Families and community organizations must step up. My administration has been learning what success looks like from school and community leaders.

They are organizing community schools that serve as neighborhood hubs, open year-round with longer hours and linked with local organizations to provide a range of opportunities, from tutoring, enrichment, mentoring and health services for children to evening classes for parents and neighborhood residents. These kinds of schools are driving student achievement and neighborhood revitalization; promoting family involvement in school; and strengthening community bonds.

Given our nation's fiscal challenges, we have no choice but to organize public, private, and community resources more effectively and collaboratively. A recent report from the Coalition for Community Schools shows that for every \$1 that the school system invests in a community school, the community invests an additional \$3. That's real leverage. According to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the return was even greater during his tenure organizing 150 community schools in Chicago.

And the research is clear: students in community schools learn better, attend school more, and are healthier.

The Lane Middle School in Portland, Ore. shows what's possible. Lane is one of 60 Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) community schools organized through a partnership of Multnomah County, the city of Portland and six school districts.

Lane works with higher education institutions, public agencies and community-based organizations to provide homework assistance, tutoring, sports and arts activities, and youth empowerment and leadership groups. The school links students and families to individualized social services and connects with them through a family engagement coordinator. A school-based health center, operated by Multnomah County, cares for students and their families. A dedicated staffer mobilizes these resources and integrates them into the school, allowing educators to focus on academics.

Principal Karl Logan reports that Lane is the first school in Oregon to move beyond federal benchmarks and has since received a state award for closing the achievement gap. Logan considers the SUN community school as a pillar of Lane's success.

We know the formula works elsewhere, in places like Chicago, Cincinnati, Evansville, Hartford, Kansas City, Montgomery County (MD), Tulsa, and rural communities as well.

To replicate and build on these successes, I want to send a clear message that we all share responsibility for our children's future, and ask Congress to offer incentives, such as grants and policy reforms that move schools and community partners toward collaborations that focus on results.

Let's modify top-down educational mandates such as No Child Left Behind to unleash the power of communities to adapt school models to neighborhood needs. State and local government, schools, and private supporters must allocate funds to schools for staffers to coordinate these critical partnerships and encourage community participation.

Washington will provide invaluable leadership. But the beauty of the community schools model, and the key to its sustainability, is that it originates from the grassroots.

Just as community schools nurture partnerships among educators, advocates, and citizens, I pledge a new level of partnership between Washington and communities nationwide to build on the promise of this approach: healthy kids, healthy families, and healthy communities. The only way we'll get there is by working together.

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