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Community Schools
A pathway to student success

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Feature Story

Community schools give teachers the support they need to help students excel.

VIRGINIA APPLEGATE can tell you how well community schools work.

When one of her math students lost a sister four years ago, he was so distraught she worried he would drop out of school. Instead, counselors at her community school, Western Hills University High School in Cincinnati, kicked in to support him. That student now attends Miami University in Ohio.

Another student, "One little girl," math teacher Rita Seifert calls her, "really wanted to go to college"—but she had a baby. The school helped her find child care, and she is on her way. "It really gave her hope," Seifert says.

Wraparound services like these can make the difference between dropping out and earning scholarships, between lives of narrowed possibility and lives full of promise. Having access to healthcare, counseling, free meals, day care, academic support, mentoring and a host of other services right on campus can make all the difference, and telling these stories, at the heart of community schools, brings Applegate to tears.

She's not the only one.

Jordan Harris, a mentor at Western, was so moved he had to excuse himself from the room after listening to his students describe their experience with MORE (Men Organized, Respected and Educated), an after-school support program he manages for African-American boys. Sitting up straight—as they'd been instructed—and carefully choosing their words, this is what the boys were saying:

"My grades are up."
"It's helped me strategize with math work."
"My decision-making is better."
"It sounds cheesy, but you join MORE, you really become organized, respected and educated."

It works in elementary school, too. At Ethel M. Taylor Academy, students get free breakfast, lunch and, if they are enrolled in after-school care, dinner. Many also participate in Food Solutions, which provides groceries on holidays; but long weekends can be a challenge.

Math teacher Julie Warmack describes a student who came in crying before one such weekend, because there was no food in her house. "I'm not supposed to tell!" she said, so torn between loyalty to her family and real hunger that she was afraid to ask for help. Staff at the food pantry—right at the school—were able to discreetly set aside extra grocery bags for the girl's family, telling her they were surplus; she got the food she needed, and maintained her family's dignity.

Then there's the first-grader who came to school out of uniform, with holes in his shoes. His teacher sent him to the office where instead of a scolding, he got a new uniform, shoes, socks and help enrolling in on-site day care after school, where he got dinner and his mother got time to look for a job. "Look at my new shoes, Miss Annie!" he chirped happily next day, when he passed the school's community resource coordinator, Annie Bogenschutz.

The community school concept is simple: Give kids what they need to be healthy and feel supported, and they will be ready to learn. The issue may be as simple as helping a student figure out which public bus to take to get to school, or as complex as finding a place for a high school senior to stay when his father has kicked him out of his home.

As teachers, our members always focus on academic success, but it's hard to get there if the student is hungry, worried over conflict at home, or otherwise preoccupied with personal issues. At community schools, where outside agencies provide counseling, healthcare and tutors right on site, they have support for the whole child.

"We're all expected to be the teacher, the social worker, the psychologist, and you can't do it all," says Jean Jencks, a special ed inclusion specialist at Western. "It makes a huge difference knowing that there's someone I can turn to."

"We are all wearing a lot of hats," agrees Warmack, "but we're all wearing a lot of hats together. … I don't ever feel alone. Ever."

Quantifying success

As affective as these stories are, "Education development in this country by anecdote is no longer a way to move forward," says Cynthia Brown, vice president for education policy at the Center for American Progress. The center, which supports research on community schools, notes a dearth of statistics on their success. But there are some:

At Oyler Community Learning Center in Cincinnati, more students have graduated in the past three years than in the previous 85, and student achievement has improved every year.

In Tulsa, Okla., community school students outperform those at noncommunity schools by 32 points in math and 19 points in reading, and graduate at a higher rate.

Multnomah County, Ore. students have shown strong progress in academics, attendance and behavior since their schools adapted a community approach, and their math and reading benchmarks have risen as well.

In Redwood City, Calif., English language learners show higher language development scores in direct proportion to their participation in community school programs, such as family engagement and extended learning, according to recent research from the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, based at Stanford University.

And the trend is spreading: It is a central focus of the AFT's groundbreaking work in poverty-stricken McDowell County, W.Va. (see story on page 11), and members of the United Federation of Teachers recently toured Cincinnati's schools for ideas on how they can implement similar services in New York.

"Community schools that align schools and community services are a promising strategy for improving student outcomes," the Gardner Center reports. "The community school strategy is central to efforts to improve America's public schools," agrees the Coalition for Community Schools.

Leading the way

In Cincinnati, where all public school teachers belong to the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, every school is a "community school." Most have full-time resource coordinators, which observers credit heavily for the success of these programs. Services range from psychiatry to dental care, healthcare, food assistance, tutoring, nutrition, mentoring, peer mediation and vocational guidance for older students. They are provided by outside organizations that are mostly self-sustaining; other funding comes from donors like United Way, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and local businesses that "adopt a class." The Cincinnati school district pays for the resource coordinators and has been supportive of the community school approach from the start.

As a result of these efforts, Cincinnati is rated the highest-performing urban school district in the state. Graduation rates rose from 50 to 83 percent between 2000 and 2009, and middle-class families have begun to move back to the city.

At Taylor, academic performance went up 15 points from 2009 to 2011; eighth-grade reading scores jumped nearly 20 points in 2010-11, and parent engagement went from 40 to 80 percent.

"It's remarkable what Cincinnati has done with wraparound services in their schools," AFT president Randi Weingarten said during a panel discussion at the 2011 Celebration of Teaching & Learning conference in March (see story on page 10). "If we had wraparound services everywhere," she added, all our students would be better prepared to excel.

Getting there

It's been a long road to success. In 2001, Cincinnati schools were considered the worst school buildings in the country, according to Bogenschutz. Structurally, they were falling apart; technology was so dated that at least one library book referred to space travel as a dream for the future. The city passed a tax to help fund a radical renovation to the system and began building new schools.

At the same time, committees of parents, staff, teachers and community members came together to determine the needs of each community and how those needs could be addressed in the schools. These local school decision-making committees continue to guide policy at individual schools.

Best practices

Warmack says the community school approach has not made problems go away—this population of students continues to be challenged with poverty, drug addiction, crime and dysfunction—but having resources right on campus makes it easier to deal with crises when they do come along. For example, the grandmother of one of Warmack's students died recently, and because the girl was quite close to her, Warmack was worried. She called the Children's Home, which provides psychological counseling at the school, and was relieved when she was told, "No problem, we've got this covered."

Marsha Marcus, a math teacher at Taylor, rests easier knowing that lunch isn't the last meal her students will get (the school offers free dinner as part of the after-school program), and she doesn't hesitate to make assignments that require paper and pencils, because the school supplies them. With the after-school program, "I know that my students have a safe place to go for three hours," so Marcus no longer feels compelled to offer free popcorn and a movie in her classroom once a week, at her own expense and on her own time, as she did before the community school paradigm was established.

Administrators feel the difference, too. At noncommunity schools, recalls Taylor principal Sean McCauley, he was the one applying head lice shampoo and calling the eye doctor for the child who couldn't see the board. In the community school, he says, he has support staff just down the hall, and the difference is "like night and day."

The many services available are all designed to prepare students for academic excellence. At Western, where the entire high school gets free breakfast and lunch, students are required to go to "study table" for homework help before they go to the Kids Café for a free afternoon snack. After that, they can go to extracurricular activities like step team, robotics, Key Club and chess. Teacher Deon Edwards says he no longer worries that he'll be pushed out of the building at the end of the day; he can work with students on homework, or help them tinker with the robots they're making for science competitions.

That sort of continuing support teaches students to trust that school is a safe place for them to live and learn. Nikela Owens, who runs a girls' empowerment club after school, says her girls "can take off the whole 'I'm big and bad' image" when they are with her. Similarly, a writing group, Women Writing for a Change, has given voice to girls who normally would not share the challenges they face at home—challenges that can include homelessness and abuse. "It brings me out of my shell," says Karissa Mitchell, an 11th-grader at Western.

Story after story shows teachers connecting students to the services they need to excel, prompting Angela Campbell Harris, the resource coordinator who helps pull it all together at Western, to praise the commitment of the school's faculty. "I am so proud to work with people who care so deeply about these kids," she says. Teachers like Lezlie Christian, who teaches drama and English, takes time out to carefully suggest anger-management sessions to a student she knows is struggling at home. And, at Taylor, Marsha Marcus, who rewards seventh- and eighth-graders in the honors society by taking them to a restaurant, teaching them first to dress well and pull out the chairs for the girls.

Students flourish with this sort of attention. One boy, who was on the verge of expulsion, experienced such a turnaround. When his teacher asked him what had happened, he told her: "I'm doing so well because y'all care about me."

"This is why we teach," says Applegate. "It's to make a difference." Community schools help make that possible.

—Virginia Myers

Learn more about community schools

If you're interested in implementing community school policy in your district, the Coalition for Community Schools is a central resource that can help you explore the possibilities. Its website offers supporting statistics, tool kits, resources, policy and more, from educators who already have established community schools, and those who are still building them. See www.communityschools.org.