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[Home](#) > Community schools bring services under one roof

Community schools bring services under one roof

Advocates here are educating the public about the concept, which has taken off in other cities.

by Dale Mezzacappa

 [p24-Children's-Aid-Society2.jpg](#)

Photo: The Children's Aid Society

New York's Children's Aid Society has developed community schools that house dental clinics and a variety of other services.

The idea of community schools, long discussed in Philadelphia but never quite a reality, takes to a whole different level the notion of maximizing time and optimizing resources for children.

More than just a place for students to have something stimulating to do in the afternoons, community schools integrate services for families right in the building. Other cities have developed the idea in ways that have been transformative, prompting a movement to bring community schools here.

Advocates in Philadelphia, in the wake of the widespread school closings, see community schools as not just an educational strategy, but as a way to revitalize neighborhoods.

"Community schools is not just afterschool, but the total integration of a neighborhood and city's assets in the schools," said Quanisha Smith of Action United.

Smith is co-chairing a task force on community schools for Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools (PCAPS). "We are still very much in the planning phase," she said.

New York City has several networks of community schools that have improved student attendance, behavior and test scores, as well as family stability and parental involvement with their children's education.

“Community schools is a strategy, not a program,” said Lukas Weinstein, director of special projects for the Children’s Aid Society in New York City, which is the lead partner for 16 community schools there.

The community schools concept is the idea behind the federal Promise Neighborhoods initiative, which is modeled on New York’s Harlem Children’s Zone.

“It’s a place, but it’s also about coordination toward a set of results identified by the school and community together,” said Shital Shah, who works in the educational issues department of the American Federation of Teachers.

“There are so many other issues that affect student learning – social-emotional health issues, economic issues, other things that families might need in terms of services and supports.”

While schools often house supplemental programming and services, Shah said these programs aren’t always creating conditions to learn.

“There’s a lot of stuff going on, but we don’t know if it is having a positive impact on the things we want to see changed, which are academic and social-emotional outcomes.”

In Cincinnati, the Community Learning Centers initiative is being credited with stemming flight to the suburbs, helping to spur academic achievement, and increasing the graduation rate – now above 80 percent.

In the Portland, Ore. area, social service agencies and businesses have partnered with several school districts, plus city, state, and county governments, to create the “SUN Service System” (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods). It collaboratively delivers services to children and families through schools. Some of the outcomes for participating students include improved attendance and behavior.

Do they cost money?

Proponents stress that community schools are not expensive or beyond the reach of a district in fiscal distress. On the contrary, they say, the strategy maximizes resources while bringing more partners into the enterprise of sustaining healthy, well-educated children.

The national Coalition for Community Schools found in a study that for every dollar spent by a district, three more public and private dollars are leveraged.

In Cincinnati, “we had no money,” said Annie Bogenschutz of the city’s Community Learning Center Institute. She said the community school movement grew out of a “crisis” in which the schools had lost residents’ confidence.

The Community Learning Center model developed in 1999, when the federal government declared Cincinnati’s public school facilities the worst in Ohio.

The federal government promised to contribute a third of the \$1 billion needed to rebuild the infrastructure, as long as Cincinnati raised the rest. A bond issue failed; then advocates thought of creating community schools. The new and renovated buildings

would serve as community hubs, bringing together services from preschool and adult education to medical, mental health, dental, and vision care, as well as programming before and after school.

Bogenschutz stressed that the capital investment did not come with an infusion of more money for implementation and maintenance. Instead, an unprecedented level of coordination maximized funds already available.

For instance, health providers who can bill Medicaid per patient for reimbursements get more clients and revenue when the services are right in the school. Plus, students get services they might not get otherwise.

Almost all the 52 community schools in Cincinnati have health services – 49 have mental health providers – but each community decides what it needs.

Each school has a leadership team composed of the principal, teachers, parents, students, community members, and representatives of the programs that serve the school. Most important, there is a coordinator at each site who manages the partnerships.

Bogenschutz's organization supervises and supports the 33 community school coordinators in Cincinnati.

Likewise, said New York's Weinstein, "the key point to our strategy is the community school director."

In New York City, there are dozens of community schools – those in the Harlem Children's Zone, 82 Beacon Centers that all have different lead organizations, and six under the aegis of the United Federation of Teachers.

Rotary phone vs. smartphone

Weinstein likes to describe a conventional school as like a rotary phone, and a community school as a smartphone.

"What you see in mature community schools is community partners working in tandem with an instructional component," said the AFT's Shah.

"There's no differentiation between before, during, and after school. You might have what is considered an afterschool program at 10 in the morning and math instruction later in the day."

Children's Aid Society started its first two community schools in 1992. When it started, Weinstein said, the language and the concepts were different. Programs were "co-located" in schools, and community-based organizations were "vendors."

Now, the talk is about integration, not co-location, and the organizations in the school are considered partners, not vendors. The driving vision, he said, is centered on children's and families' needs, not on sustaining a particular program.

“It’s really about changing the school culture and dynamics of how people work together,” said Weinstein. “It’s all about relationships. ... I like to say that for community schools to work, partners have to have the word yes written in their hearts.”

Among the positive results is increased parental involvement.

“We talk about parents as partners and we want parents to come in schools and be part of child’s education.”

And while the concept turns the school into a community center, it’s not just about having people come into the school, Weinstein said. “It’s also about getting students and staff into the community.

“The local business improvement district might hold meetings in the schools, but we also want them to want our kids to come into their businesses after school.”

Adopting the concept

PCAPS is making the establishment of community schools in Philadelphia a priority. It is educating the public about the model and hopes to have a pilot project running next year.

At the District, Stacy Holland, executive director of the Philadelphia Youth Network, is developing a plan to better manage strategic partnerships, which is a first step toward creating community schools. Superintendent William Hite has created a position of chief of student services; Karyn Lynch, who holds that job, is working on getting District families more integrated health and social services.

Hite said that he wants to work with PCAPS, but that the creation of community schools “can’t be an alternative” to school closings.

Action United’s Smith said that PCAPS hopes a robust community schools initiative might help “stave off future closings” and become a “turnaround model” for struggling schools.

The Netter Center at the University of Pennsylvania, which has been doing some work in this field, next year will launch a pilot program in four schools: W.D. Kelley in North Philadelphia, Penn Treaty in Fishtown, Sayre High School in West Philadelphia, and the Kensington Health Sciences Academy.

Each will host a community partnership coordinator and work closely with school leadership to find agencies and organizations to address the particular neighborhood’s needs.

For the other cities, getting to “mature” community schools has been an intensive, never-ending process. Smith says she knows it will not be easy here.

“The community has to buy in to wanting the process to happen, the principal has to be on board, and parents are OK with parts of the school being repurposed,” she said.

“We must make it clear to parents that we are making things easier for them instead of taking away something.”

About the Author

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[3] <mailto:dalem@thenotebook.org>

[4] <http://thenotebook.org/taxonomy/term/19>

[5] <http://thenotebook.org/taxonomy/term/168>

[6] <http://thenotebook.org/taxonomy/term/169>

[7] <http://thenotebook.org/taxonomy/term/361>

[8] <http://thenotebook.org/taxonomy/term/14>