

Austin Voices leader talks about 'community school' strategy at SXSWedu

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A SXSWedu panel on community school strategies March 3 featured Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers; Allen Weeks, executive director of Austin Voices for Education and Youth; and Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute in Cincinnati.

Strategies to save schools at risk of closure should involve talking with teachers and community members to get their input, Allen Weeks, executive director of Austin Voices for Education and Youth, said in a SXSWedu panel March 3.

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Weeks spoke as part of a panel on achievement gaps and educational equality called "Reclaiming the Promise Through Community Schools," which featured Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute in Cincinnati.

Kamine said schools in Ohio have implemented the "community school" strategy and seen significant academic and enrollment improvement.

The community school strategy involves talking with teachers, parents and principals to determine what is and is not working and then partnering with local groups for support, Weeks said. For example, when the St. John neighborhood in Austin learned that Webb Middle School was in danger of closing for academic reasons years ago, local residents got together and asked teachers what they would do, he said.

“[Teachers] told us pretty much the same thing over and over. They said, 'Our families are so unstable. ... because they're being evicted, they're chasing cheap rents, they're having to pile up two or three families in a house or an apartment.’”

In response, the community set out to develop a family resource center for the school and received donated resources from the city of Austin and other organizations. Today, Austin Voices operates five such centers in the city, Weeks said.

Community schools normally have a coordinator to help secure and manage social services such as mentoring, tutoring and after-school programs, Weeks explained, noting Reagan High School reassigned an assistant principal to a new role, director of student and family services, when it was at risk of closure.

Recently, Austin Voices has worked to help the school district plan for Eastside Memorial High School and the now-vacant Allan Elementary School campus in East Austin.

“This is now a strategy that people see as a real alternative to this kind of mass closure, mass firing [strategy],” Weingarten said. “This is a strategy that says, 'Let's fix our schools; let's stabilize our communities.’”

Weeks said some other school improvement strategies seek to place blame for schools' struggles, but the community school strategy does not.

“Struggling schools get into sort of a back-and-forth blame thing with their communities oftentimes,” Weeks said. “They have to get that vicious cycle to turn into a virtuous cycle.”