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Is Kenney's community schools initiative making a difference in Philly?

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South Philadelphia High School has the same challenges it always had: a large, needy student body with perhaps the city's highest concentration of special-education students, a high percentage of English-language learners, and a shoestring budget.

But things feel different at the school this year, Principal Kimlime Chek-Taylor said. South Philadelphia is one of the city's initial nine community schools - learning institutions with embedded social services and other supports.

Southern, as it's known, now has a city-funded community school coordinator, an employee to match student needs to available partnerships, another adult to keep the school's 568 teenagers on track. It's got a new clothes closet, a food pantry, more after-school programs and a focus on finding jobs for those who want them.

As a result, student attendance is up, Chek-Taylor said. The school's climate is better.

"Having the support from the mayor's office - it just gives me a very different perspective when I come to work," Chek-Taylor said. "There's a sense of urgency. Being a community school just changes the perception of South Philadelphia High"

Mayor Kenney bet big on community schools, a concept started elsewhere and brought to Philadelphia this school year. He ran on a promise to bring 25 of them to the city in four years, and pledged \$40 million over four years to fund them.

This year, the city has budgeted \$3.75 million for Southern and the other community schools - Cramp, F.S. Edmonds, Gideon, Logan, and Southwark elementary schools; Tilden Middle School; and Dobbins and Kensington Health Sciences Academy high schools.

The program looks different at every school; community schools are driven by what the neighborhood and the school needs. At Logan, for instance, the push is toward bringing in fresh fruits and vegetables and on shoring up safety for kids going to and from school; Southwark created mentorships and offers free physicals for students in partnership with the city Health Department.

Projections have about 9 percent of the city's controversial new soda tax funding community schools through 2021. (Pre-kindergarten programs, another major Kenney push, would get the lion's share of the soda-tax money, about half. The rest would go to bolster Philadelphia's fund balance, spruce up its parks and recreation centers, and elsewhere.)

At Southern, the community school effort is spearheaded by Janelle Harper, whose enthusiasm for the work means she's sometimes text messaging Chek-Taylor at 2 a.m. with another idea for how she might expand opportunities for students and families. She has become so central to the school that some kids call Chek-Taylor "principal" and Harper "community principal."

Junior Alayshia Bridges has attended Southern for three years, and the changes to her school this year are remarkable, she said. Harper is a resource, she said - and things just feel different.

"We have this structure you can't get anywhere else," said Bridges, 16. "We have stuff to support you - book wise, clothes wise, everything."

Bridges helps organize the clothes closet, but she's also gotten items from it: two coats, some socks.

"It feels like family is helping you out," she said.

Kenney and other city and district officials toured Cincinnati's Oyer School as they built their vision for Philadelphia's community school model. Oyer has vision, medical, and dental clinics, a daycare center, and a mental-health center with five therapists. Southern and the other Philadelphia schools are a long way off from that.

But Otis Hackney, Kenney's chief education officer, warns that community schools will not fix every ill - "this is not a light switch," he said - but he sees enormous potential.

"This is a baseline," said Hackney. The vision is to fill Southern, the massive structure at Broad and Snyder, with services not just during the day, but at night, on the weekends, in the summer.

The programs means much to Hackney. He was until 2015 Southern's principal himself. In a way, he inadvertently brought the model to Philadelphia.

"I didn't even know what a community school was," said Hackney. "We just needed partners because our kids had so many needs."

On Hackney's watch, South Philadelphia brought in after-school programs and mental-health services. Now there are even more: freshman will be starting mindfulness training soon. There is ballroom dancing, music and art programs, tutoring and mentoring.

Harper, a former school therapist who worked for a private provider inside Philadelphia schools, started her job by chatting up everyone in the school, from students and teachers to cleaning staff. She knocked on doors, met with students and parents.

"I was in everybody's business," Harper said. "I said, 'Why are our kids not here on time? Why are their parents struggling?'"

She completed a needs assessment, and looked at what partners the school had, the work they did, and how effective they were. Data is a big part of the model - at monthly meetings, Harper reviews with providers how the students they serve are doing.

"It's not just, 'More is better,'" said Susan Gobreski, the city's Director of Community Schools. "It's targeting resources. Sometimes, you need to say, 'Are these the right partners?'"

Harper does the things Chek-Taylor would never have time for: chatting up new-business owners in the neighborhood, gauging their willingness to bring in student workers. Organizing a group interview for qualified students to land internships. Helping to launch the food bank, and the clothes closet.

The things Harper has been able to bring to Southern have made a difference already, Chek-Taylor said, but they dream bigger still: what about summer programs? What about a new kitchen to replace the badly undersized, outdated facility now home to the school's popular culinary program? They want to open the building for homework help, tutoring, mental health services, job-placement training. Harper is always on the hunt for more mentors, for food and clothes donations.

"We're a block long," Harper said. "We should be doing a lot more for the community."

The program will expand, adding new schools in the fall, Gobreski said, though the court battle currently being waged by the soda industry means that fewer community schools than originally planned will come on line. The limited number of new community schools will be announced after City Council finalizes its budget.

By the numbers, South Philadelphia is struggling. It scored low - just 6 out of 100 - on the Philadelphia School District's School Performance Report, which evaluates things like test scores, climate, attendance, parent participation and other measures.

But those who know it well say Southern is a good school, that moving schools that educate a large number of kids living in poverty takes a long time, and don't tell the whole story.

"When people talk about schools and how schools perform, what's not captured is some of the things we do," said Hackney. "We have literally saved a child's life. Changed a child's life. That's never captured in the SPR."

Being a community school will make that easier, he said.

And Mayor Kenney? On a recent visit, where he checked out the clothes closet, shook hands and ate a feast prepared by the culinary students, he was all smiles.

"I think," he said, "it's a model school."

Read more by **Kristen A. Graham**

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