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## Community-focused Leaders Pushing Back Against Depersonalized Educational Reform

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*Guest blog by Ted Purinton, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the American University in Cairo, and Carlos Azcoitia, Distinguished Professor of Practice at National Louis University in Chicago. Their book, [Creating Engagement between Schools and their Communities: Lessons from Educational Leaders](#), was published by Lexington Books in 2016.*

As school districts brace for yet another set of battles over the merits and drawbacks of school choice schemes, charter schools, and other forms of privatization, a quiet but persistent reform has been taking place in urban, rural, and suburban school districts across the US, one that has impacted schools from Oakland to Chicago, Cincinnati to New York, and the plains to Appalachia: community-based schooling. The US historically has relied on neighborhood-based enrollments; building off of that tradition, the community-based schooling movement has accentuated the most fundamental aspects of location by connecting schools to community institutions in ways that evade cookie-cutter standardization of schools across districts and states. While Spry Community Links school on the southwest side of Chicago emphasizes collaboration with colleges and universities, the Oyler School, west of downtown Cincinnati, leverages partnerships with multiple social service agencies to decrease drop-outs and increase college participation. Each of these schools has found ways unique to its particular environment to find local solutions to local problems.

In reflecting on the experiences of these schools, we have found that the lessons of community schools can be applied in all schools—even charter schools, private schools, suburban neighborhood schools, and everything in between. And unsurprisingly, we have also found that behind any close school-community relationship is a tenacious and thoughtful leader. Across all types of community-based schools, we highlight here just three of the lessons to be learned from their leaders. And given that many of these traits are found in leaders whose schools are not technically classified as “community-based,” we have begun to call their principals, along with their leadership teams, “community-focused” leaders.

First, and perhaps most important, community-focused leaders build the academic identity of their students. Community schools create contexts to support academic growth. They exert positive impacts in student learning as they move from their school to their homes and in community settings. Perhaps the starkest divide between schools and families, businesses, religious institutions, and other local organizations is the one exacerbated by the academic pursuits of schools. When schools and school systems are perceived to be bureaucratic, elite, and out of touch, how do we bridge that cultural gap? Influential community-focused school leaders intentionally create dynamic opportunities for families and community organizations to see their distinct and essential places within schools. They strive to help students and their families recognize that they all have inherent work within the mission of the school and that their ideas and aspirations can be supported and extended by the school’s academic programming.

Second, community-focused leaders encourage leadership teams comprised of people both within the school and outside. While they never neglect their roles as instructional leaders, they become community leaders, as well. Some of the most influential that we know help to build capacity in other community organizations; they meet regularly with the religious leaders of the neighborhood; and they often seek advice from local small business owners. They hold meetings regularly to develop strategies for local organizing efforts around literacy, health, and safety. They are available to people with the understanding that their schools and the surrounding neighborhoods are best seen as seamless environments.

Third, community-focused school leaders advocate vociferously for all members of their communities. They fight to enhance their community's quality of life and strategize with city hall on community "greening" campaigns. Local legislators realize these leaders are active in promoting their schools; but they also know they have built coalitions within the communities to encourage policies that support and enhance the work of the school and all its partners. Ultimately, they bring resources into the community in a way that benefits the school, its students, and all other local institutions.

We have seen such leadership exhibited by principals in charter schools, urban neighborhood schools, rural schools, and everything in between. A school need not be identified strictly as a "community school," though the label often does distinguish it. The point is that in this time of increased talk about privatization of the public school system, let us focus on what really matters. We can choose to focus our precious energy on the politics, or we can build capacity within our communities. We hope more school leaders will ignore the negativity and instead get out into their communities and lead.

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