

The Vindicator

Community learning centers offer hope to Valley schools

MAY 24, 2020

We're in a difficult time for public education. Spending at the state level has been cut, and with a slow economy we can expect more funding struggles statewide and locally. At the same time, our students' academic, emotional and physical needs are greater than ever due to the challenges of remote learning, remote delivery of support services and increased stress, trauma and grief.

This is not a new dilemma for Mahoning Valley public schools. When General Motors first announced it would close its Lordstown plant and abandon the communities that built billions of dollars of wealth for the company, educators knew what that would lead to: underfunded public schools with more students who would be experiencing poverty and needing resources and emotional support.

In addition to standing with their community in the Drive It Home campaign to keep the Lordstown plant open, Lordstown teachers asked themselves, "How do we leverage all the resources that are available to us — from our school district, from local, state and federal government and from local businesses and nonprofits — to meet the needs of our students and effectively do more with less?"

They looked toward a proven model for doing this: community learning centers, which are built on the principle that public schools are natural neighborhood hubs of educational, cultural and health resources. Each learning center is both a place and a set of partnerships that provide

resources and services based on the assets and needs of each school community.

Cincinnati Public Schools, a great example of this model in Ohio, have been better prepared to deal with the pandemic and school closures because of their community learning centers. Through school-based health centers and telehealth services, online early childhood instruction, food pantries filled with donations from community and business partnerships, free wi-fi hotspots, legal aid and more, the community learning center model has given CPS students and families the resources they need to get through this crisis together.

At Roberts Academy, a pre-K through eighth grade school in Cincinnati, the school building may be closed, but the community learning center team is working seven days a week. Tracy Power, a resource coordinator with the Community Learning Center Institute, organizes Roberts' Community Learning Center and coordinates a team of teachers, volunteers, and staff from different partner organizations that has called each of the school's families to check in, identify needs and connect kids and families with services.

Services at Roberts include a school-based health center, early childhood learning and an Immigrant and Refugee Law Center. Though they don't all provide the same services, Roberts is just one of dozens of community learning centers in Cincinnati.

Community learning centers are not for crises only. They are how we should structure education even in the best of times. This model deals with the everyday, real life that is in our schools.

OFT's local unions in the Mahoning Valley, led by the Lordstown Teachers Association and the Newton Falls Classroom Teachers Association, have been joining with administration in their districts to begin exploring how we build community learning centers to respond to the increased needs students and families have as the region goes through a number of transitions. This is a model that can work in individual school districts or as a broader regional collaboration

A starting point for expanding community learning centers would be to provide funding for a community engagement process in every district, and resource coordinators at every school, who would build and maintain partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits.

Harnessing those resources can help our schools and our communities weather this storm. And maintaining those partnerships, even when not in crisis, will help students overcome barriers to learning.

Now more than ever, we need to break down the walls between organizations and sectors, and work collaboratively to take care of one another and solve problems together. The pandemic has brought people together, and collaboration and cooperation in this moment can build the foundation for community learning centers in the future.

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