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Sebelius calls for schools to become community havens

Apr. 7--More than 1,100 school administrators, healthcare personnel, parents and community members gathered in Center City today to rally around Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius's call to utilize city school buildings as safe havens for families, even after the school bell rings.

Sebelius, the keynote speaker at the two day Coalition of Community Schools' National Forum said school buildings should be a cornerstone of the community, housing health clinics, after school programs and family activities.

"These are tax paid institutions, we need to open them up," Sebelius said. "Community schools will make it easier for families to access the service they need to succeed."

Mayor Nutter agreed saying, "Schools need to be the anchor of this community's health.

"Philly is a place where many of these things we are talking about are already being put into place. We need to keep it going."

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers and Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, will discuss the benefits of community schools tomorrow as the forum continues in the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown.

Weingarten will also be visiting West Philadelphia High School to talk with teachers and students about getting the community involved in the school.

West Philadelphia partners with the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships, a program developed by the University of Pennsylvania.

Martin Blank, staff director of the Coalition for Community Schools, said in order to mold schools into community dwellings people from different arenas such as healthcare providers and principals have to come together.

"Unless we work together we won't get this done," Blank told the crowd. "Partnership gets results."

Sebelius said her inspiration for community schools came from her father, John Gilligan, former governor and Cincinnati school board member, who helped turn Cincinnati schools into community learning centers.

She noted one particular Cincinnati elementary school in a poor part of town that went from having under 35 percent of its students attend high school to having half the students go to college in six-years time.

The school was extended to 12th grade and transformed into a community center which provided health care and other services needed for learning, she said.

After witnessing such a dramatic change, Sebelius devoted her work to pushing this agenda onto the national stage with the help of Arne Duncan, President Obama's education secretary who made a virtual appearance.

"If a child is not healthy, they will not learn, they can not learn, they are not equipped to learn," she said.

A reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act would create a \$410 million "safe, healthier" grant program for schools.

The funding would expand the approximately 2,000 school-based health centers that service more than 1 million children and adolescents across the country.

Ira Harkavy, founding director of the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships, attributes the recent outpouring of attention to Obama.

"The coalition has grown steadily over the last 13 or so years, but last year particularly there has been a driving force," Harkavy said. "President Obama has put improving education, building community and advancing civic responsibility at the forefront of his mission."

Harkavy said schools cannot effectively mold students alone. The community needs to be involved.

Philadelphians, Congressman Chaka Fattah (D-Pa) and Amy Gutmann, University of Pennsylvania president, speakers at the forum, agreed.

Nutter said the city shares many of the values of community schools.

He noted the city's recent proposal to tax sugary beverages as an example of the city's focus on health. Having health clinics housed in schools would also support the wellness of Philadelphians, he said.

Contact Elisa Lala at elala@phillynews.com or 215-854-5626.

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