

A Strategy To Invest In: Community School Leaders Brief Federal Policymakers



The community school strategy drives our work – not the grants.

~Dr. Cathlin Gray, Associate Superintendent of Family, Schools and Community Partnership,
Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

In these uncertain financial times states, cities, and school districts are looking for efficient ways to spend their limited dollars, while still producing positive outcomes for their students, families, and communities.

Last month, the Coalition hosted two briefings to roll out a new report, [*Financing Community Schools: Leveraging Resources to Support Student Success*](#), showcasing how three communities are utilizing the community school strategy as the vehicle to address their strained fiscal realities. The first briefing, held on Capitol Hill, was co-hosted with the offices of Senators Reed (D-RI) and Sanders (I-VT), along with Representatives Hoyer (D-MD) and Chu (D-CA). It was largely attended by Hill staffers from both sides of aisle. The second briefing at the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) was part of a series of monthly briefings for staff to inform their work. Anna Hinton, Director of Parental Options and Information, Office of Innovation and Improvement moderated the briefing. Both briefings showcased community school initiative leaders featured in the report ([Evansville, IN](#); [Multnomah County, OR](#); and [Cincinnati, OH](#)) and had a lively Q & A section. The featured community school leaders were:

- *Marty Blank, President, [Institute for Educational Leadership](#); Director, [Coalition for Community Schools](#)*
- *[Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation \(EVSC\)](#): Dr. Vince Bertram, Superintendent, & Dr. Cathlin Gray, Associate Superintendent of Family, Schools and Community Partnership, EVSC*
- *[Cincinnati Community Learning Centers \(CLC\)](#): Darlene Kamine, Executive Director of the Community Learning Center Institute and Julie Sellers, President of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT)*
- *[Schools Uniting Neighborhoods, Multnomah County, OR](#): Lorenzo Poe, Partnership Development Director of Portland Public Schools and Karl Logan, Principal, [Lane Middle School](#), Portland, OR*

These leaders briefed Congressional staffers, USDE staff, among others about how implementing community school strategy helps individual schools and local jurisdictions operate and use funding more effectively. They shared inspiring stories of how they were able to spend less by leveraging their

communities' resources to support students, educators, families, and the community. They also highlighted the breadth and depth of their partnerships, their support from leaders at all levels of government and from community institutions, along with their unique perspectives on how the strategy impacts teaching and school administration.

This article will illustrate how the community school strategy has enabled each initiative to leverage resources support not only their students, but also their teachers, families, and communities.

Community Schools Make Financial Sense

One of the key findings in the Coalition's [report](#), is that diversified funding in community schools leverages district dollars 3:1. Darlene Kamine, from Cincinnati's Community Learning Centers Institute, remarked, "The one constant in public education is the inconsistency of funding." Community schools are savvy at responding to this "inconsistency." For example, Cincinnati operates under a fundamental principle that all partnerships must be financially self-sustaining without dependence upon the school budget. Functioning in this manner, Cincinnati's CLCs have been able to leverage their community school coordinator function by ten times their cost.

In Evansville, leveraging all available resources is paramount. When talking about how his district views the community schools strategy, Dr. Bertram noted, "Community schools aren't a program; this is the way we do business." In Evansville, over 70 school and community leaders form results-driven partnerships, based on the needs of that specific neighborhood and those specific students. Dr. Cathlin Gray from EVSC, explains how her districts have taken all of their resources and aligned them with the EVSC community schools strategy. For example, Gray has pooled moneys from Full Service Community Schools, Title I, SIG – Title I School Improvement Dollars, Special Education, Title II – Professional Development, Title III – English Language Learners, Head Start, and McKinney Vento Homeless Grant - just to name a few. Citing the importance of braiding all types of funding, she emphatically noted, "The strategy drives our work – not the grants."

Multnomah County provided yet another example of how the community school strategy leverages resources from all sectors. In sum, the county aligns over \$45 million in resources from school districts, city, county, and State organizations Multnomah County utilizes the community school strategy as a vehicle for neighborhood revitalization and to combat poverty. They have dedicated about \$6.5 million to operating their community schools strategy. Additionally, over \$9 million comes from match or partner services, of which \$5.8 million comes from the School District (i.e. Title I, general funds, etc.). They also have about \$6 million that comes from in-kind contributions. Underscoring Multnomah County's commitment to the community school strategy, Lorenzo Poe said, "the strategy is so valuable that county and city leaders are planning to increase funding this year, even in these tough financial times....you can't even run for office anymore with supporting the strategy."

Community Schools Facilitate Teacher Buy-in

During a community schools panel, convened by the Center for American Progress, in October 2009, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan emphasized that the community school strategy is one where "teachers benefit; children benefit; families benefit; schools ultimately benefit." During the briefings, Dr. Bertram stressed that the support "has to be intentional can't be layering effect for teachers."

Julie Sellers, President of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, reiterated Duncan's Bertram's statements, explaining that the support offered at CLCs helped to increase attendance because students were getting their health needs taken care of at the school instead of staying home – creating



the conditions for student learning. She reinforced her support for CLCs stating, “If every high-poverty school in the country had a CLC that would be our first step to turning around schools.”

During the briefing at the USDOE, Lorenzo Poe echoed Duncan’s statement noting,

Teachers would say, "You know Mr. Poe, we're here to teach. We would love to be able to just teach...we're asked to be nurses, we're asked to be preachers, we're asked to be clergy, we're asked to be this, we're asked to be this. We're asked to do everything, and then teach." And so [the County’s] began to think about how to wrap around service and supports, with a coordinator, extend the day, and allow those things...And in Multnomah County, in the SUN System, when teachers have a struggling student who needs medical attention, or their family is homeless, there is a place for them to go because we know that impacts student achievement.

Karl Logan, Principal at Lane Middle School observed that “every teacher has a threshold” of when they will potentially leave the profession. Principal Logan is utilizing the community school strategy to support not only his students, BUT his teachers as well. Based on his experience, the resources offered at community schools decrease teacher burn-out and keep them in the profession longer. By providing resources to students, this strategy helps alleviate the burden on teachers to “fill the void” of services in their students’ lives; in short, it helps our teachers focus on teaching. More and more teachers are welcoming this support because they are seeing that their students’ needs are being met AND they are coming to class ready to learn.

Community Schools Foster Family and Community Engagement

Research is clear on the link between family engagement and student achievement.¹ Family engagement² is an integral component of community schools. It is essential to creating the conditions for learning for our youth. Panelists shared how they are engaging families in their communities. In Evansville, Dr. Bertram and his team held community meetings at all hours, including midnight, so that more families could be engaged in what was taking place in their children’s schools. He commented that the midnight meetings were some of the best attended because many parents are working two jobs. In Evansville families help select the partners for their community schools. Dr. Bertram emphasized that it’s “...not so much about compelling parents to be engaged, but creating the conditions so that they can be.”

The cornerstone for Cincinnati Public Schools’ CLCs is strong family and community engagement. As the superintendent and school board began on the journey of turning all schools into CLCs they engaged all 52 of Cincinnati’s neighborhoods. Eighty percent of the tax base didn’t have kids in school, so the neighborhood by neighborhood engagement process was crucial. They met with students, school personnel, churches, grandparents, businesses, parents, and other community members to figure out

¹ Henderson, Anne T. and Karan L. Mapp. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

² **Family engagement** as defined by the Coalition, means the process of engaging families in meaningful ways and assisting them to actively support their children’s learning and development. Family engagement is a shared responsibility of families, schools and community-based organizations. This shared responsibility is continuous from birth through young adulthood and reinforces learning that takes place in the home, school, and community.

what they wanted to see in their schools. Darlene Kamine, stressed that the “community school is a state revitalization strategy, not just for people connected to schools.” At each meeting, the community was asked, “What would it take for you to send your child and/or grandchild to this school? What would it take for this to be the kind of neighborhood that you and grandchildren would choose to live in?” It was by this threshold that they measured the quality of each school.

Recommendations

The overriding policy recommendations that were consistent across all three districts was the need for federal funding streams to be more flexible as well as incentivizing partnerships at the local level, both of which would enable school districts and local jurisdictions to implement the community school strategy even more effectively. The current lack of flexibility makes this difficult. To this point, just a few weeks ago, Secretary Duncan released [a statement](#) to Governor’s saying that the most important role that the U.S. Department of Education could play is “to support you, provide flexibility in every way possible, and highlight and reward your vision, courage, and success.” In an accompanying document, [Smart Ideas](#), the Department highlights community schools as a strategy that leverages alternative sources of funding. Read more on about this statement on our [blog](#).

Conclusion

In recalling his time as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, which started with six schools grew over a couple of years to 150, Secretary Duncan notes that, “[the community school strategy] was easily the best leveraged money we spent. For every dollar we spent, we were getting back 5, 6, 7 dollars from the business community, from non-profits, from the social service agencies, from the state, the federal government. This is the best money any of us can spend.”³

In communities all across the country, schools remain the center for educating our children. It is now more important than ever to come together around policies that sustain, strengthen, and expand community school initiatives. When creating policies, we must urge our policymakers to answer the question they asked in Cincinnati: “What would it take for you to send your child to a particular school?”

To ensure that policymakers are answering this question, ***we need you to take action and contact your Members of Congress*** so that community schools can expand and flourish across the country and our youth can succeed! Currently, there are several pieces of legislation supporting community school principles that need support from both you and your Members of Congress. [Visit our “ESEA Watch”](#) to learn about this legislation and to take action!

³ Remarks during The Children’s Aid Society’s 2009 Community School Practicum