

EDUCATION

Hillary Clinton Advocates For Community Schools Model

BY CASEY QUINLAN JUL 25, 2016 8:10 AM

Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton speaks at the American Federation of Teachers convention at the Minneapolis Convention Center in Minneapolis, Monday, July 18, 2016.

In a recent speech before the American Federation of Teachers, Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton's voice cracked as she discussed major inequities in the quality of education that students from low-income families receive.

"That's a stain on all of us. Let's create more community schools, more partnerships between schools and services and nonprofit organizations. Let's pledge that we'll give children who need it the mental health services that they deserve," Clinton said.

Community schools — which provide social services to students on the school premises and prioritize community and parent engagement — have been around for a long time, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. Baltimore, New York City, and Chicago have almost 400 community schools put together and Oakland has almost 30 of these community hubs. But the concept has only recently gained steam on a national level as a potential solution for the closing opportunity gaps between low-income and middle class and wealthy children in schools across the country.

Advocates for equity in education favor a community schools approach because, by including social services and health services within or near the school building, educators can better address social factors outside of the school's control. For example, if a student wants to speak with a mental health professional, they can go to an office nearby.

Educators argue that if factors such as illness, hunger, and mental health issues were addressed at school, children would ultimately be more successful.

If a student is hungry at school, they will not be able to learn.

"If a student is hungry at school, they will not be able to learn. If a student has health issues, of course they won't be able to learn or perform on tests. None of this can happen unless the fundamental needs of the students and families are met," said Marina Marcou-O'Malley, policy director for the Alliance for Quality Education of New York's Public Policy and Education Fund. She added that the goal is to make the school environment "a welcoming and positive place" for struggling students.

Over the past several years, major cities have made huge strides toward developing more community schools.

New York's Board of Regents, for instance, met earlier this month to discuss how schools can qualify for funding from a \$75 million pot set aside for community schools. This \$75 million marked major progress for groups pushing for community school expansion, such as Alliance for Quality Education of New York, Coalition for Educational Justice, Make the Road NY, and NY Communities for Change. Of the pot of money, \$28 million will go to schools in New York City — and, as part of another pot of state money, \$100 million more will go to community schools, with more than \$10 million going toward the Syracuse School District in Upstate New York.

The board of Pittsburgh Public Schools is also working to expand community schools. According to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, a nonprofit organization called Homewood Children's Village decided to work with local schools to provide needed social services. The board discussed the possibility of a partnership with the county's human services department to reduce costs if students from other schools wanted to use some of the services provided in a community school. A vote on how best to expand community schools will happen later this month.

Cincinnati has long been a model of a large-scale community school approach, although schools there are labeled "community learning centers." One example is Oyler Community Learning Center, a pre-K through 12th grade school. Since it became a community school three years ago, Oyler has graduated more students than in the entire 85 years the school has existed. The school was considered in "academic emergency" from 2006 to 2007 school year was on "academic watch" from 2007 to 2009 — now, it's in the "continuous improvement" stage.

"Cincinnati is interesting because they have this data system to really track what types of programs and services children were receiving within a given school, and connecting that back to third grade test scores or teacher reports based on behavior and attendance," said Laura Bornfreund, director of early and elementary education policy at New America. "They were attempting to connect services and outcomes."

Many of these Cincinnati schools also help close the "homework gap," a concept that Clinton mentioned in her speech for the AFT. It's tougher for low-income kids to finish their homework because their homes may not have reliable internet access, something that schools can address by keeping their computer labs open after school.

There's growing support for this approach on the federal level, too. The U.S. Department of Education's full-service community schools program allows schools to apply for grants to help schools set up things like counseling services, remedial education, and even dental care. Promise Neighborhood competitive grants, which began in 2010, also supports community school efforts. Influential coalitions, such as the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, which has powerful member organizations such

as the American Federation of Teachers and has organized protests across the country, have also championed the community school approach.

As advocates for community schools see funding more community schools expanded, however, they need to ensure these funds are spent wisely. This means ensuring that parents and community members have input in the process of figuring out what kinds of services students need.

“Before they become actual community schools, there has to be a needs assessment and talking to parents and the community at large to figure out what is necessary for educational purpose,” Marcou-O’Malley said. “That kind of involvement is supposed to be beyond the bake sale, beyond the traditional parent conferences — parents are equal partners in this process.”

It’s a win-win.

The main difference for teachers working in community schools, according to Bornfreund, is that they have someone to refer children to after they notice students are hungry or possibly need counseling. Once a school has outreach services and perhaps a staff member whose full-time job is to coordinate with families, it’s easier for the family to ask for access to services themselves.

“The teachers are identifying things kids may or may not need all the time, whether it’s systematic or they think ‘This child may perhaps benefit,’ they have some context. But in the model that seems to be working at community schools, the teacher does then have the resources or person on the school side, and tell so and so, ‘I think they need X, can you follow up with a family and find out what would be appropriate?’ And especially as the relationships get built with families, and with a coordinator on school site, the need can come directly from family as well.”

There are some advantages to the organizations partnering with schools as well, Bornfreund added.

“A lot of the time it is helpful to the organization because they are getting in touch with population they should be serving. It makes it easier to deliver services to the people It delivers services to anyway. It’s a win-win,” she said.