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A Look at Community Schools

Saba Bireda October 2009

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Children living in poverty face many obstacles outside the classroom that can hinder their success in the classroom. Unaddressed health care needs interfere with learning and cause low attendance. Inadequate and inconsistent housing may deprive students of a safe and quiet place to study. A lack of affordable and accessible child care forces many young adults to sacrifice learning opportunities to care for younger family members. And poverty's economic stress may cause students to be less engaged and parents to be less involved in their children's education.

The advent of accountability-based school reform has pushed many high-poverty schools to focus on providing effective instruction and meeting high academic standards. Numerous schools have made progress in these areas but few have been adequately equipped with the tools needed to confront external learning obstacles related to poverty.

A small but growing number of “community schools” have bridged the gap between the provision of antipoverty services and an excellent academic program. They capitalize on the school's physical space and access to students and families in order to deliver much-needed services in a central, accessible location. Community schools partner with nonprofits and local agencies to provide students with health care, academic enrichment, mental and behavioral health services, and other youth development activities without burdening school staff.

Community school partnerships can complement proven school improvement strategies—effective teachers, challenging curriculum, and expanded learning time. These partnerships also allow teachers, principals, and staff to concentrate on what's happening in the classroom with the knowledge that students' “outside” needs are being addressed.

And community schools involve adults through adult education classes and onsite social services. By extending school hours and enlarging the school's role in the surrounding community, community schools can become a hub for community-building activity while continually providing students with a strong academic program.

Recent evaluations of community schools throughout the country demonstrate that schools that integrate student services and a high-quality educational experience have a positive effect on students and their families in a variety of areas including student achiev-

ment, school attendance, and parent involvement.¹ Yet community schools differ greatly in the type of services they provide and how much those services are integrated with academic instruction. Additional research can determine which aspects of community school models most effectively improve student achievement.

The success of current community school initiatives, the urgent needs of students living in poverty, and the potential of community schools to increase student achievement point toward stronger federal support for the community school strategy. We need not look far for examples of national community school policy—England has committed to transform all of its 23,000 schools into extended schools (the term for community schools in England) by 2010.

This report will provide an overview of community school strategies in the United States and how community schools can decrease poverty's detrimental effect on students. There are many examples of community school initiatives—from national models to local school district initiatives. This report highlights the examples where research shows community schools have had the most success. It will also review England's extended school model and suggest how the United States can expand community schools based on England's experience.

Although community schools in the United States are limited in number, lessons can be gleaned from some successful initiatives throughout the country.

- Each community school needs a strong academic program at its center, no matter how comprehensive the nonacademic services are. Afterschool and all other extracurricular programming should complement the school's central academic mission.
- Principals, teachers, and other staff must be trained and willing to collaborate with outside organizations in order to maximize learning.
- Partnering nonprofits or agencies should dedicate an onsite employee of their organization as a full-time resource coordinator to operate as a contact point between the school and organization, students, parents, and other community members.
- Parents, school staff, community members, and other stakeholders play an integral role in determining the services that are most in need at a community school. Parent and community involvement in planning a community school can ensure that services that are utilized improve student outcomes.
- Consistent, quality evaluations can help community schools determine the strengths and weaknesses of their services and programs and prevent schools from becoming stuck in nonproductive partnerships.

A community schools primer

What are community schools?

There is no one definition of a community school. The Coalition for Community Schools, the leading advocacy organization for community school development, defines community schools as “both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources.”² According to the coalition, most national models and local initiatives share a common set of principles: fostering strong partnerships, sharing accountability for results, setting high expectations, building on the community’s strengths, and embracing diversity and innovative solutions.³

The Children’s Aid Society, which operates several community schools in the New York City area, and the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools define a community school as “a public school that combines the best educational practices with a wide range of vital in-house health and social services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally and socially prepared to learn.”⁴ Still others identify community schools by their accessibility to parents and community members, the extent to which school and other social services are integrated, and the opportunities present for service and community-based learning.

While definitions vary, most community schools share the following characteristics:

- A partnership between the school and at least one other community organization, which could be nonprofit organizations, city service agencies, universities, or foundations
- Extended hours before school, after school, on the weekends, and in the summer
- A menu of programs and services created to support students and families, including primary health care, dental care, parent education, child care, and job training
- Activities and policies intended to engage parents and community members

Community school advocates stress that community schools are not simply schools with added programming because there are many schools that offer optional programming and see no difference in student achievement or engagement. Instead, community schools

work with partner organizations to radically change the school's role in the lives of students, families, and the surrounding community.⁵

But the work of the partner organizations and agencies must be fully integrated into the school culture to see change. Teachers must be trained to recognize student needs and refer students to the appropriate access points. Afterschool activities should purposefully enforce lessons learned in the classroom. And parent education classes should reflect the needs of students, families, and the surrounding community.

Why do we need community schools?

High-poverty schools educate children who come to school with a host of unmet social, emotional, and physical needs.

For example:

- Ten percent of children living below the poverty level and 9 percent of children living in families with incomes 100 to 199 percent of the poverty level had no regular source of health care in 2007.⁶
- Roughly one in three poor and near-poor children had no dental visits between 2005 and 2006.⁷ Low-income children experience 12 times as many restricted activity days due to dental disease as children in higher-income families.⁸
- About 12.4 million children (17 percent of all children) lived in households that were classified as food insecure at some point in 2007.⁹
- Forty-three percent of U.S. households (both owners and renters) with children had one or more of three housing problems in 2007: physically inadequate housing, crowded housing, or cost burden resulting from housing that cost more than 30 percent of household income.¹⁰
- The Afterschool Alliance, an advocacy organization for afterschool programs, found that more than 14 million children went unsupervised after school in 2003.¹¹

These circumstances can have a devastating effect on student achievement.

- Researchers at the University of Michigan found that the average cognitive scores of pre-kindergarten children in the highest socioeconomic status group are 60 percent above the scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group, based on a study of data collected from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study.¹²

- Only 22 percent of fourth graders living in poverty in 2007 scored at or above proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s math assessment.¹³ Only 17 percent scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment.¹⁴ Performance for older students was even worse—only 15 percent of eighth graders living in poverty scored proficient on NAEP math and reading assessments.¹⁵
- Low-income youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 drop out at a rate four times the rate of their higher-income peers.¹⁶

Most schools simply lack the capacity to address students’ “nonacademic” needs. Teachers must devote their time and skills to increasing academic gains through effective instruction. And schools do not have sufficient staff members or funding to run additional programs, the time or staff to consistently contact parents, or enough hours in the typical school day for students to receive instruction *and* services.

We know that high academic standards paired with effective and engaging instruction can lead to significant academic gains for students living in high poverty. But we also know that students cannot leave the damaging effects of poverty behind them at the school-house door. High-performing community schools build upon an already strong academic program and use the school space to provide programs and services that complement academic instruction.

Community school partnerships are not a substitute for a high-quality education, but research shows that the services and programs offered by community schools can help create the conditions needed for high student achievement.

What effect do community schools have on students?

Community schools offer a wide range of services aimed at improving student outcomes, which makes it difficult to measure the specific programs or activities that directly contribute to increased student achievement. The available research on community schools does show that sites across the country are successful at overcoming poverty-related challenges to learning. Many of these sites have also seen an increase in student performance on state assessments. For example, the COMPASS program at Central Elementary School in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania saw an increase in the number of third-grade students scoring “proficient” and above on state assessments from 26 to 54 percent in reading and from 40 to 66 percent in math between 2006 and 2008.¹⁷ Numerous examples like these can be found across the country.¹⁸

Parent involvement: Research on parent involvement has shown that student achievement increases when parents are actively engaged in their children’s education.¹⁹ By extending services to adults, community schools bring parents to school more often

and have more opportunities to encourage involvement in the school. The Coalition for Community Schools has found that parents who receive services from their children's community school are more likely to attend activities related to their children's education.²⁰ For example, at Carlin Springs Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, 95 percent of the adults taking English as a Second Language classes attended parent-teacher conferences.²¹

Health access: The most obvious advantage of school-based health care is improved access to services, but this can have a positive ripple effect on students' learning. When health services are offered at school, students are not forced to miss class due to untreated illness or delays associated with seeking care. Students can experience more regular medical and dental check-ups and shift toward utilizing health services for preventative care.²² A review of research on comprehensive school-based health care found that student attendance and grades improved when basic health needs were being met at school.²³

Student behavior: Students who spend more time at school involved in positive activities will have more positive feelings about school. Many community schools also offer mental health services, behavior counseling, and family therapy, which are a resource for teachers instructing students with challenging behaviors. Shaw Middle School, a community school partnership with the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, saw suspensions decrease from 464 to 163 from 2000 to 2006.²⁴

Family support: Schools that offer adult education classes such as GED-preparatory and English as a Second Language classes assist with public benefits and provide employment and housing counseling that can help low-income parents acquire the skills and support they need to increase their household income and provide a more stable home environment. Parents with less economic stress have more time and inclination to be involved in their children's education. Students are also less distracted from their academic work when basic needs like shelter, food, and clothing are consistently available.

High school completion: Communities in Schools, a national initiative dedicated to dropout prevention, has documented its program's effect on high school students. It found in a national evaluation that 36 more students out of every 1,000 remained in school at high-implementing CIS schools—schools that have implemented the full CIS model of blending schoolwide dropout prevention services and targeted intervention services.²⁵ The Coalition for Community Schools recently studied a number of community high schools that increased their graduation rates including Parkrose High School in Portland, Oregon, which posted a 72 percent graduation rate (compared with a district rate of 54 percent) in 2008.²⁶

Community school initiatives in the United States

Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia currently have community school initiatives in place. Some of these community schools are individual schools where school leadership has developed partnerships and implemented reforms needed to provide students with additional services. Others are the product of foundations or university-community initiatives. Local school districts also create and provide support for community schools. The community school strategy transcends urban and rural boundaries—there are successful programs in places ranging from inner-city Chicago to rural Pennsylvania.

A few examples of community school initiatives with positive student outcomes are below. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for improved student outcomes, including student gains, but these initiatives have all had success in providing students with a combination of a strong, standards-aligned academic programming and out-of-classroom support designed to meet student and family needs.

Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative²⁷

The Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative includes more than 150 community schools and is a model for whole-district adoption of the community schools strategy. The Chicago Public Schools CSI has roots in the small but successful Full Service School Initiative first implemented at three Chicago public schools in 1996. Between January 1997 and December 1999, the three schools offered more than 400 programs (mostly after 3 p.m.) and partnered with at least 25 community or city organizations.²⁸ Reading scores at all three schools improved at rates exceeding the citywide average (CPS 9 percent vs. Brentano 9.8 percent; Marquette 10.5 percent; Riis 18.7 percent).²⁹ Student mobility, the rate at which students transfer between schools, decreased at two schools (as much as 9 percent for one school).³⁰ And the number of teachers involved in planning or staffing afterschool activities increased by more than 20 percent at all three schools.³¹

Then-Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan partnered with private funders to launch CSI in 20 schools in 2001. The district then committed to continue growing the initiative to 100 schools by 2007 with a vision toward making every school in the district a community school.³² About 45 percent of CSI schools are funded by 21st Century Community Learning Center grants while the remaining schools are funded by the district or foundation grants.

The CSI model is not highly prescriptive in the types of services and programs schools must offer, but it does require schools to carefully plan partnerships that will support the school's academic program.³³ Each Chicago Public Schools community school is required to partner with at least one experienced nonprofit organization, which serves as a "lead partner agency."³⁴ An employee from the organization acts as a full-time resource coordinator and is the contact point between the school and nonprofit, students, parents, and other community members.

An advisory board consisting of teachers, parents, the school principal, and community members determines the needs of the school's community and selects programs and services that meet those needs. Lead partner agencies do not provide all the available services; rather, the organization helps to find additional organizations to benefit the school. CSI estimates that there are an additional 400 organizations working in CSI schools with over 50 lead partners.³⁵ The CSI model requires all activities at the school to integrate with the school's curriculum, support literacy, and promote other key program areas.³⁶

CSI schools offer a range of activities, but most schools house a combination of academic enrichment activities, adult education, ESL classes, technology training, art and cultural activities, recreation, and health services.³⁷ Every CSI school is required to serve at least 75 students through its extended services and must be open for 12 hours a week beyond school hours.

Although student achievement data is limited, early research reveals that Chicago's CSI schools are achieving significant academic improvement. A 2007 evaluation found that CSI schools outperformed traditional Chicago Public Schools by about eight percentage points in both math and reading in the period from 2001 to 2006.³⁸ "Older" community schools made significant gains in reading in 2005 and 2006, suggesting that more practice in community schooling and consistent funding may contribute to academic progress.³⁹

Achievement Plus Schools, St. Paul, Minnesota⁴⁰

The Achievement Plus schools represent a small but effective public-private community school initiative. The initiative includes three K-6 elementary schools—Dayton's Bluff, John A. Johnson, and North End—which are all located in one of St. Paul's poorest areas. The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation provides technical support for the initiative while local, state, and federal funding support the initiative's afterschool programming.

Achievement Plus applies a three-prong approach: rigorous academics, afterschool learning opportunities, and "learning supports," or nonacademic services. The academic program at each school, the Project for Academic Excellence, emphasizes consistent instruction and assessment at each grade level in reading, writing, and math; professional development for teachers in implementing workshop-based learning; and summer

programs for low-performing students. The Achievement Plus schools also offer students an afterschool education program four days a week. The program coordinates afterschool learning with each school's classroom curriculum.

The schools also offer a variety of “learning supports” for students and families living in poverty. Students at all three schools can access the Wilder Child Guidance Clinic, which provides onsite mental health services and/or teacher consultations. A nonprofit family resource center provides families with emergency housing and food needs, adult education, and social service referrals. The schools also offer health clinics for any community member, onsite dental services for students, and individual and family therapy. Each school partner provides the services free of charge for the school community in exchange for rent- and utility-free space at the school.

Dayton's Bluff, the first Achievement Plus school, has seen the most success in student achievement scores. Combined reading and math state assessment scores rose from just 12 percent of students testing proficient in 2000 to about 63 percent of students testing proficient in 2007.⁴¹ Test scores at Johnson have fluctuated from 37 percent of student testing proficient in 2001 to 33 percent in 2006 and up again to 51 percent in 2008.⁴²

Children's Aid Society Community Schools, New York⁴³

The Children's Aid Society has established a community school model that numerous community schools across the nation follow. CAS began operating two community schools in the Washington Heights neighborhood in conjunction with the New York City Board of Education, the local community district, and community-based partners in 1992, following a three-year planning process.

CAS now operates 21 schools in Manhattan and the Bronx and also runs the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools. The center, which CAS founded in 1994, has hosted 10,000 visitors for “study visits.” Using an “adaptation, not replication” theory, the center instructs interested school leaders in the principles and practices of community schooling.

Each full-service CAS community school partnership includes a core instructional program, afterschool learning opportunities that are integrated with the school-day curriculum, Saturday and summer programs, health and mental health services, adult education, and community events. The CAS Bronx Family Center provides students in the area with preventative and acute health care, dental services, and onsite family counseling and therapy. CAS also brings community members into the school by hosting large community-wide events such as the Dominican Heritage Celebration in Washington Heights.

CAS employs coordinators at the organizational and local level to align in-school and out-of-school learning to ensure that its afterschool and summer programs have a meaningful impact on student learning. A CAS staff member also sits on the school leadership team, which develops the school's comprehensive educational plan and evaluates the effectiveness of the school's educational program.

The CAS model stresses heavy parental involvement in the school's development and governance. An initial needs assessment with parents, students, and community residents determines the activities and services to be implemented at the school. Each school also maintains a Parent Resource Center where parents can attend adult education classes. A parent coordinator, hired from the school community, conducts outreach to parents and manages the center.

Several evaluations of CAS schools show the model has led to increased student achievement, parent involvement in the school, and student engagement. A 2009 study comparing CAS schools and other New York City Public Schools found that every CAS elementary school scored at least 70 percent on progress in English/language arts assessments versus a citywide mean of 50 percent.⁴⁴ A 1999 study of CAS's parent involvement efforts at two schools found that parent involvement rates were significantly higher than at comparison schools.⁴⁵ With an increase of services, special education referrals have decreased—the referral rate at the five oldest community schools was 24.4 percent lower than comparable schools from 2001-2004.⁴⁶

Examples like these Chicago, St. Paul, and New York schools are all over the country. Despite the success of the strategy in many places, community schools tend to be the product of local initiatives and are often supported by private funding. The next section will describe the developing role of federal policy in supporting community schools.

Federal policy's role in supporting community schools

Community schools have benefited from federal policies promoting afterschool education, community learning centers, and other social services, but federal education policy has only recently begun to specifically promote the growth of community schools.

The U.S. Department of Education provided a small number of grants to community school initiatives in 2008 under the Full Service Community Schools Program. The program encouraged partnerships between public elementary and secondary schools and community-based organizations to provide comprehensive education, social, and health services for students, families, and communities. Only 10 community school initiatives were funded under the \$5 million program, despite the fact that hundreds of local initiatives applied for the grants.

In September 2009 House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) and Senator Ben Nelson (D-NE) introduced the Full Service Community Schools Act of 2009. The legislation would establish a five-year grant program to encourage the growth of community schools. The legislation emphasizes that eligible grantees must have the capacity to coordinate services between the school and partner agencies, demonstrate the link between community school services and improved academic achievement, and adhere to “principles of effectiveness” in selecting programs and services.⁴⁷

The guidance for the use of Title I, Part A American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds recommends that funds may be used to support schoolwide community school models.⁴⁸ The guidance contemplates several ways that local education agencies can use ARRA funds, including funding for a full-time coordinator, parent education classes that relate to student academic improvement, and professional development to help teachers recognize students’ nonacademic needs.⁴⁹ The Coalition for Community Schools suggests that local education agencies can use Department of Education Innovation Funds to support local development of community schools, expand the scope of community school services, and document best practices to be used in scaling up community schools.⁵⁰

The Obama administration has also recommended \$10 million in funding in the fiscal year 2010 Department of Education budget for “Promise Neighborhood” initiatives, based on the highly successful Harlem Children’s Zone.⁵¹ This initiative would give grants to community-based organizations to develop neighborhood-wide programs that link

schools and support services. These Promise Neighborhoods will aim to provide services that span a child's life from early childhood education to college counseling, with a goal of increasing academic achievement for students living in poverty.

As these examples demonstrate, community schools are gradually being recognized on the federal level as an effective school reform strategy. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a steadfast supporter and early implementer of the Chicago Community Schools Initiative, has advocated making schools “centers of communities” with extended hours and services.⁵² Dedicated funding and explicit federal policy would encourage community school growth and a more consistent model of community schools. England's community school experience, which will be discussed next, shows that the national adoption of a community schools strategy is an ambitious but attainable goal.

Britain's national adoption of the community schools strategy

Several schools in England, like existing community school initiatives in the United States, sought to reduce poverty's effect on student achievement by providing extended services at school. The English government capitalized on the ideas presented by these first extended schools and has been able to successfully transition to a national program of extended schools. As the community school strategy gains traction in the United States, the British experience can provide useful lessons on how to create a strong national policy on community schools including ways to advance a basic model, create partnerships, and fund a national strategy.

England enacted major legislation in 2004 aimed at reforming the delivery of children's services, including education.⁵³ The legislation reflects a comprehensive reform strategy, known as "Every Child Matters," that recommends the integration of children's services as the key to improving outcomes for disadvantaged children.

The government undertook an aggressive national initiative to convert each public school into an "extended school" by 2010 in order to carry out the Every Child Matters directive. Extended schools are not exclusively for low-income students, but government officials have been explicit in their belief that extended schools can help students overcome challenges related to poverty.⁵⁴

To help roll out a national plan, the national government mandated that schools adopt a community school model, known as the "core offer." The "core offer" includes several required components:

- Schools must be open longer, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- Schools must provide a varied menu of activities, including academic support, cultural activities, play, and recreation
- Parenting support
- Expedited referrals to special services such as speech therapy and behavioral health care providers
- Primary schools must provide child care from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- Communities must have access to the school facility

The British government estimates that 14,000 schools—about two-thirds of the country’s schools—are currently offering extended services, and by 2010 every school is expected to provide the core offer to students.⁵⁵

From national mandate to local implementation

Extended schools are only one part of England’s efforts to integrate children’s social services. As such, the national government places a high emphasis on schools working with local authorities to coordinate extended services. Local authorities, who administer the funds to support extended school services, are charged with providing guidance to schools on the range of services available to students.⁵⁶

Schools are legally required to complete a consulting process with the school community to determine needs prior to implementing extended services.⁵⁷ Schools are also expected to coordinate extended services with needs identified in school improvement plans.⁵⁸ This coordination helps schools evaluate the effect that extended services have on student achievement.

For example, a school with low first-grade reading scores may determine that a lack of reading materials at home and parent illiteracy are deterring student achievement. The school then implements joint reading sessions for parents and children during extended hours and coordinates special reading programs with the local library. In the evaluation stage, the school tracks the reading achievement levels of students whose parents attend the program.⁵⁹ Schools are also required to report on how their extended services affect student outcomes in the school inspection process.⁶⁰

Extended schools, like U.S. community schools, are encouraged to partner with nonprofit organizations and local agencies to provide extended services. Such partnerships ensure that schools are not overly burdened with staffing and running additional programs. Again, local authorities play a large role in matching schools and service providers. All local authorities employ an extended services remodeling adviser who advises schools on partnership opportunities. England’s Training and Development Agency provides guidance on ways schools can incorporate teachers into extended school plans without increasing their workloads.⁶¹

Local authorities also help organize clusters, where multiple schools share the responsibility of providing services. The core offer is the same at every school, but many schools have successfully implemented programs that target the specific needs of their students and the surrounding community. For example, one school provides support therapy for children acting as caregivers while another school donates space to a community Internet cafe.⁶²

Schools that see successful implementation of extended services generally are able to retrain staff to view the school and students as part of an interconnected system of services.⁶³ England's National College for School Leadership offers focused professional development for teachers in extended schools to help recognize student needs.⁶⁴ To avoid burdening teachers, many schools have utilized paraprofessionals and nonteaching staff in helping to manage and staff extended services.⁶⁵ Successful schools must also find a way to staff and coordinate extended programs with the government funding, which is currently as low as £22.25 (about \$35.36) per student at some schools.⁶⁶

Funding

The British government committed £840 million (\$1.3 billion) in start-up funds for schools to provide extended services from 2003 to 2008.⁶⁷ The government pledged another £1 billion (\$1.6 billion) to fund extended services from 2008 to 2011.⁶⁸ As funding decreases, schools and local authorities are expected to make extended schools more self sufficient.⁶⁹

The government does advise local schools to charge for certain services as a way to ensure the sustainability of extended services.⁷⁰ Critics charge that fees deter poor students, the intended beneficiaries, from taking full advantage of extended services.⁷¹ In 2009, the government announced that a portion of the 2008-11 funding, about £217 million (\$345 million), would be allocated to helping schools offer at least two hours of free extended activities a week to low-income students.⁷²

Lessons from successful community schools

Profiles of successful community schools show that community initiatives with the greatest success rates were able to improve student outcomes by providing a strong in-classroom academic program and simultaneously connecting students and families with nonacademic resources.

Staff at the profiled initiatives emphasize the need to have strong leadership and buy in from teachers and other staff in order to make the community school work. Principals must be willing to allow community organizations into the school as partners, parents and other community members must be permitted to use the school facility for nonacademic services, and teachers need to collaborate with afterschool staff to ensure that afterschool learning enforces in-classroom curriculum.

No matter how comprehensive the nonacademic services are in a school, each initiative must put a strong academic program at the center of its community school strategy. For example, early in the initiative's history, the Achievement Plus schools in St. Paul found that they were not seeing significant academic progress from students although they were providing a robust menu of social services at each school. The initiative refocused its attention on in-classroom instruction and developed a new standard-based curriculum that was adopted by the entire St. Paul school district.

Parent and community input is necessary so that the needs of students and families will be met through the services offered at a community school. Existing community school initiatives conduct needs assessments in a variety of ways from informal surveys to coordinated advisory boards. Services should also be planned with an eye toward evaluation so that schools can accurately measure utilization rates and the effect on important student outcomes such as student achievement, attendance, and parent involvement.

When schools truly become “centers of communities,” school staff are relieved of many of the demands that traditional schools encounter. With parents already in the school to receive services, the task of parent outreach is less onerous. Teachers can call upon social service partners to assist students with mental health or medical needs, thereby reducing disciplinary incidents. All of the schools in the profiled initiatives place a full-time community school coordinator in each school, which reduces administrative time spent on managing afterschool activities and partnerships.

Staff at all the profiled initiatives commented that successful community schools have a more positive school climate that is noticeably different from traditional schools. The Children's Aid Society has consistently found that teachers at their community schools are absent less and report more job satisfaction.

British results and lessons for the United States

As England nears its 2010 deadline for national rollout, it appears likely that the government will succeed in meeting its goal of transforming every school into an extended school. The British experience provides some helpful lessons for the United States as community schools begin to play a larger role in national school reform discussions.

Requiring a “core offer” of services: England’s “core offer” model simplifies the start-up process for schools implementing extended services. While schools do personalize services to reflect the needs of students and community, the “core offer” helps to guide the process. The government can also easily measure the rate of implementation by evaluating whether a school provides all the features of the offer. At the same time, the “core offer” is general enough to allow schools a great deal of flexibility in the type of services offered. There are several successful models in the United States, such as the Children’s Aid Society community schools, that could provide elements of a “core offer” for American community schools.

Requiring schools to complete a consultation process: Before offering extended services, English schools are required to consult with the school community about student and family needs. The consultation process ensures that schools do not simply add on services that will not meet student needs.

Local authorities should serve as extended service coordinators: Each local authority has an office or staff member responsible for helping local schools identify nonprofit organizations and agencies with which to partner. Local authorities are best positioned to inform schools about which opportunities to partner. The cluster model also allows schools with similar needs to cut costs by sharing service delivery. In the United States, local or county government agencies could play a similar role for school districts to assist in coordinating social services at community schools.

Sustainability of funding: The British government pledged a substantial amount of start-up funding and subsequent funding to meet the 2010 deadline. However, there are concerns about the sustainability of extended schools as government funding decreases. While higher-income schools can charge for services, low-income schools will continue to need government funding or be able to transfer most of their costs to partner organizations. Any federal funding program considered in the United States will need to contemplate the ability of community schools to offer service if funding ends.

Heavy emphasis on evaluation: English schools are instructed to choose extended school activities for which use and impact can be measured. Schools must also demonstrate that extended services reflect school improvement goals. Schools are evaluated on their ability to assess student and community needs and the extent to which services address those needs. Creating a culture of needs assessment and evaluation ensures that money and time is not wasted on nonimpactful programs.

The extended school initiative in Britain is generally considered to be a successful reform strategy. This may be the result of political framing—when announced, the extended school strategy was promoted as a method to better develop England’s workforce and more effectively use public money.⁷³

Therefore, much of the research on extended schools concentrates on service implementation and costs. The U.K. Department of Children, Schools, and Families found that the first wave of extended schools improved on school performance measures at twice the rate of the national average between 2005 and 2006.⁷⁴ Another independent study also found that the performance of low-income students specifically improved at extended schools.⁷⁵ Survey results also demonstrated improvements in student engagement, family stability, and school-community relationships.⁷⁶

Conclusion

America's schools continue to make strides in improving the educational outcomes of children in poverty. However, many schools, even those with strong academic programs, find that they are stymied by challenges beyond their control. The community schools strategy—using school-community partnerships to overcome the obstacles presented by poverty—can effectively complement classroom-based reforms. Federal policymakers should continue to create funding opportunities for community schools, bearing in mind some of the important lessons and strategies from successful domestic and international initiatives.

Endnotes

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Children's Aid Society, "Community Schools," available at <http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/communityschools> (last accessed October 2009).
- 5 Coalition for Community Schools, "Community Schools: Partnerships for Excellence," available at <http://www.communityschools.org/CCSDocuments/partnerships.html> (last accessed October 2009).
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