

Schools

The Perfect Place to Address the Needs
of the Whole Child



**ON
THE Issues**
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The Children's
Aid Society
www.childrensaidsociety.org

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Executive Summary

With the nation's recent emphasis on student test scores, The Children's Aid Society fears that schools are missing the opportunity to be the institutions that help turn out successful young people. School climate and connectedness are the key ingredients for creating healthy schools that produce successful students. These factors are worthy of attention at every level. Bringing the community into schools and making schools the service point for youth development and support services are essential elements of this approach.

Ramonaⁱⁱ is a single parent of two boys ages seven and twelve. She works full time and attends classes at night to earn her associate's degree. She has no extended family to help with her children when they get home from school each day, and she earns too little to pay for childcare. The school is concerned about the behavior of her older son and has recommended testing for special education services. Ramona is worried about him and is at a loss for what to do. He has not had problems in school before and his grades have dropped significantly. She is also anxious about how the behavior of her older son is affecting her younger son. Ramona wants to be more active in the school but doesn't know where to begin. She is worried that as her sons get older, they may not have the support they need to succeed.

A Job Too Big for Schools Alone

Public schools are one of the great symbols of American democracy. There is a growing emphasis at the federal, state and local levels

on adequately preparing youth for productive citizenship and great concern about equitable access to high quality educational opportunities:

- Nationwide, the gap between the performance of white students and that of African-American and Latino students is far too large, resulting in too few young people who

are prepared for productive adulthood. In New York City, just over half of children who start high school graduate in four years.ⁱⁱⁱ

There have been wide-ranging responses to these alarming realities – with varying degrees of success – and schools are under mounting pressure to

increase student achievement:

- At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act has put a spotlight on the achievement gap and requires schools to close this gap (particularly for children of color, English Language Learners and children with special needs). In New York City, the nation's largest public school system is

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undergoing the most significant reforms in a generation.

As children grow, the three major influences on their development are family, school and community. Each plays a critical role in their social, emotional, physical, cognitive and moral development. Children's school success or failure does not occur in a vacuum. Without a doubt, the quality of school leadership, teachers, curriculum and pedagogy make a huge difference. However children, especially poor children, face myriad issues that affect *how prepared* they are to learn and often preclude them from succeeding in school. Issues can include: medical and dental problems, mental health challenges, stress in families and communities related to violence, un- or under-employment, immigration status and no place to go during out-of-school hours.

School Climate Matters: Increasing Student Connectedness to School

While schools cannot be expected to bear sole responsibility for the success of children, we must not underestimate the impact schools *can* have on children's lives. One of the responsibilities of schools is to provide children with a safe environment in which to develop academically, emotionally and behaviorally.^{iv} The quality of a school's climate correlates directly to creating a learning environment in which children can thrive. Research indicates that a positive school climate increases how connected children feel to school. When children feel

more connected to school, they are absent less often and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. They are more likely to be engaged, are more motivated to learn and their academic achievement increases. Bullying, fighting and vandalism decrease.^v

Youth development programs in schools promote healthy school climate.

A nurturing, positive school climate demands a commitment from every member of a school community – the school leader, teachers, custodians, security officers, kitchen staff, parents, children and school

partners – to promote a shared vision and common expectations. The following are some contributing factors that have been shown to affect school climate positively and promote school connectedness:

- High quality social and emotional learning programs and youth development programs,^{vi}
- Increased parental involvement,^{vii}
- High academic standards and relevant curriculum,^{viii} and
- Personalization of learning. Every child in a school has a relationship with at least one caring adult.^{ix}

Community Schools: A Strategy that Strengthens Youth, Schools, Families and Communities

Because of their potential to positively impact the lives of children and families, schools are logical and effective community hubs – especially if their primary goal is to prepare children to be productive citizens. Along with focusing on academic achievement,

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schools can increase access to critical services for children by bridging school, family and community. Schools cannot and should not bear this responsibility alone, however. Community-based organizations, which have significant expertise in the fields of mental and physical health, parental involvement, early-childhood education, after-school programs and youth development, can and should partner with schools to locate essential student support services in or close to schools.

This philosophy, which is grounded in solid research, is the foundation for a partnership between The Children's Aid Society and the New York City Department of Education to form community schools – public schools that combine the best quality educational practices with a wide range of vital in-house health and social services (provided by Children's Aid) to ensure that children are physically, emotionally and socially prepared to learn. Currently there are 21 Children's Aid community schools in New York City, and The Children's Aid Society's National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools helps other cities and countries adapt the model to fit their specific communities' needs.

Outcomes over a 13-year period show that the comprehensive, coordinated services offered in community schools, based on this partnership strategy, are most effective when partnering schools have stable leadership and a strong core instructional program. Although

support services cannot fully compensate for weaknesses in leadership or instruction, when integrated into a school with a solid leader and a strong instructional program, they result in improved outcomes for children, families and communities. Outcomes from research on Children's Aid community schools include:

Community-school partnerships help schools offer students essential support services.

- Increased academic achievement^x;
- Reduction in special education referrals^{xi};
- Improvement in mental and physical health^{xii};
- Improvement in social and emotional development and community engagement^{xiii};
- Increased parent involvement^{xiv};
- Benefits of early childhood education^{xv};
- Improvement in school climate,^{xvi} and
- Improvement in teacher attendance.^{xvii}

Recommendations for Supporting Community Schools

Based on 13 years of experience in developing and operating community schools, The Children's Aid Society recommends the following:

1. Adopt a Whole-Child Approach to School Reform that Incorporates Critical Roles for Families and Communities

- Acknowledge the necessity of providing services to support the physical, emotional, social and cognitive health of children as a

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strategy to improve young people's learning and development in school. Train and promote leadership that understands this connection. Include families and communities as an essential part of school reform efforts, thereby increasing the investment and involvement of these vital stakeholders and fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

- Systematize the expectations of partnerships between community-based organizations and schools through memoranda of understanding that clearly delineate roles and responsibilities and state accountability measures.

2. Include Improved School Climate and Increased Student Connectedness as Fundamental Pieces of any School Reform Effort

- Include social and emotional learning, parental and community involvement and youth development as critical, not peripheral, parts of principal and teacher training programs and ongoing professional development.
- Hold schools and their partners accountable for creating a positive, equitable school climate. Include relevant indicators in the evaluation process of all those employed inside schools.

3. Align Resources with Needs

- Support expansion of funding (at the federal, state and local levels) for the following initiatives and/or programs: school-based mental health services, universal early childhood programs, out-of-school-time programs (including academic enrichment,

youth development and pregnancy prevention) and parent involvement and education programs.

- Ensure, through policy, that resources are targeted to the most underserved schools and communities and mobilize technical assistance resources (existing and new, private and public) to support this effort.

4. Align Goals Across Agencies and Provide Incentives to Reward Improved Coordination

- Plan, coordinate and evaluate community schools across programs and agencies to reduce duplication and fragmentation. Wherever possible, use uniform and streamlined data collection systems to reduce unnecessary duplication.
- Provide monetary and other resource incentives for schools and community-based organizations that coordinate their efforts and improve their results.

5. Fight for Local, State and Federal Community Schools Initiatives

- Join with local advisory groups and coalitions to support community schools initiatives and educate key stakeholders about the community schools strategy.
- Advocate for statewide legislation and sustainable funding streams aimed at encouraging local initiatives with adequate provisions for technical assistance.
- Support the federal Full Service Community Schools Act (H.R. 2207/S. 986) sponsored by Senator Ben Nelson (D-NE) and Representative Steny Hoyer (D-MD).

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The Children's Aid Society's Community Schools

The Children's Aid Society partners with the New York City Department of Education in 22 public schools called community schools, located in Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island. Children's Aid brings a host of needed services directly into the schools to help children learn. Children's Aid provides medical, dental and mental health services; social services; after-school, evening, weekend and summer hours; adult education and opportunities for expanded parental involvement to its schools, making the school the centerpiece of the community. Because students in Children's Aid community schools receive high quality services right in the schools, they arrive in classes ready to learn, and teachers feel freer to teach. Children's Aid community schools show better student and teacher attendance, less grade retention, better test scores and better parent involvement than similar schools.

About Children's Aid

For more than 150 years, The Children's Aid Society has been assisting New York City's children and their families without regard to race, religion, nationality or socio-economic status. Children's Aid helps children in every aspect of their lives from infancy through adolescence, providing guidance and resources to ensure a child's current well-being and future potential. With over 100 programs and more than 45 locations in New York that touch the lives of more than 150,000 children every year, Children's Aid is one of the country's largest and most innovative child and family social service agencies. Visit www.childrensaidsociety.org or contact policy@childrensaidsociety.org.

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- i One in a series of policy papers by The Children's Aid Society, 105 E. 22nd St., New York, NY 10010, (212) 358-8930.
 - ii In this actual case, the names have been changed to protect the family's privacy.
 - iii The Class of 2005 Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2004-2005 Event Dropout Rates, The New York City Department of Education, Division of Assessment and Accountability.
 - iv Blum, Robert, *School Connectedness: Improving the Lives of Students*. John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, (Baltimore, Maryland, 2005).
 - v Op cit., *School Connectedness: Improving the Lives of Students*. See also Catalano RF, Haggerty KP, Oesterle S, Fleming CD, Hawkins JD. "The importance of bonding to school for healthy development: findings from the Social Development Research Group." Paper presented at Wingspread Conference on School Connectedness, June 2003, Racine, WI.
 - vi Osterman, K.F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 323-367.
 - vii Op cit., *School Connectedness: Improving the Lives of Students*.

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- viii Ibid.
- ix National Research Council, Institute of Medicine. “Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students’ Motivation to Learn.” Board of Children, Youth and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2004.
- x “21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings,” prepared by Kira Krenichyn, Heléne Clark, Nicole Schaefer-McDaniel and Lymari Benitez of ActKnowledge, September 2005. See also Summary of Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999, prepared by ActKnowledge.
- xi Unpublished paper: “A Call for School-Based Student and Family Support Services,” by James Langford, October 2005.
- xii The Children’s Aid Society’s Community School Mental Health Services Analysis of Progress in 4th Year of the New York State Education Department’s VESID – Effective Practices Contract. Evaluation conducted by Heléne Clark and Robert Engle of ActKnowledge, November 2003. See also PS 50 Evaluation of the Health Component in its First Year. Evaluation conducted by Heléne Clark, Melissa Extein, and Robert Engle of ActKnowledge, September 2003.
- xiii Op cit., “21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings.” See also op cit., Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999.
- xiv Op cit., Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999.
- xv Op cit., The Children’s Aid Society’s School-Based Zero to Five Head Start Programs at P.S. 5 and P.S. 8. are the Spring Board to Children’s Success in School and Form the Base of Real Parent Involvement. See also Unpublished paper: “Children’s Aid Society Community School Head Start Program – Retrospective Study,” by Margaret Caspe and Dr. Andrew Seltzer, October 2005
- xvi Op cit., Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999. See also Op cit., “21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings.”
- xvii Op cit., Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999. See also Op cit., “21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings.”