

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: A Vehicle for Educational Equity

by

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## Introduction: Why Community Schools?

The impacts of poverty in this country cast a long shadow over the issues of education, social mobility and global competitiveness. Although we are finally focusing more national conversation on the issues of income inequality we do not talk enough about poverty in America. We seem to be at a loss about specific solutions that could address this overbearing issue. Where do we find solutions to these complex social issues? We have to look no further than our local neighborhood schools that have become community schools.

What does it look like when communities take collective responsibility to strengthen families and support children through community schools? Access to services is enhanced by resources such as school-based health and wellness centers. Curriculum is enriched by connections to local businesses and cultural institutions. Community volunteers are coordinated and trained to provide tutoring and mentoring. Resources are leveraged through coordinating city, school and county leadership and initiatives. Student learning is extended by coordinating afterschool providers with classroom studies. Adult learning is available through school site classes in parenting, ESL and computer skills. Parent and community engagement is amplified by making the local school site a central hub of community activity.

By strategically aligning resources, these intentional collaborations strive to guarantee each child has access to the academic, health and social supports he or she needs to succeed in school and life. The community schools approach provides a structure to solve problems, align efforts and coordinate programs for maximum impact. By working together, each community can leverage its unique resources to focus on the needs of the whole child.

Community schools coordinate community resources using schools as hubs in support of student success and strengthened families. Community schools focus on equity by aligning the resources of an entire community to ensure student success. Educators, families, community volunteers, health and social service agencies, businesses, government, non-profits and others committed to children and families are changing outcomes by establishing deep working relationships and collaborations. They focus on developing new operational structures to ensure that budgets, services and programs are aligned to the school plan to meet the needs of students and their families.

In California, we have thriving community schools across the state in Los Angeles, Pasadena, Redwood City and San Francisco. Two districts - Oakland and Vallejo - are becoming full-service community school districts in which every school will be a community school. Nationally, community schools can be found in about 100 places, from Cincinnati, OH to Hartford, CT to Tulsa, OK and Albuquerque, NM. Over 1,500 people invested in community schools - educators, parents, nonprofit and business leaders, elected officials and community organizers - came together in April for the Coalition for Community Schools National Forum in Cincinnati, OH.<sup>1</sup> More recently, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio invested \$52 million to launch 40 community schools in New York City in partnership with the United Way.

Our work in California is thus part of a growing national movement around community schools as a vehicle for educational equity, to close both the achievement gap and the opportunity gap. Results are promising: a Child Trends 2014 report reviewed national evaluations of integrated student supports and community school initiatives and found growing evidence that community schools reduce grade retention and dropout rates, while increasing attendance, math achievement, and grade point average.<sup>2</sup> The authors also reported that community schools offer a positive return on investment. We offer here

our perspectives on community schools as an effective equity strategy for California and nationwide, and our respective work and leadership to elevate this strategy in the discourse of education reform in the state legislature and in Congress.

## **California State Senator Carol Liu, D-CA: Community Schools – An Equity Strategy Uniting Communities and Families**

As a policy maker, I seek to use government resources efficiently to produce positive outcomes. Coordinating the delivery of social services, enrichment and curriculum with the school district, non-profits, local government and the business community maximizes the effective and efficient use of resources and addresses inequities. That is why I support community schools.

I chaired the California Senate Human Services committee at the height of the great recession. As the current chair of the Senate Education Committee, the connections between health, social service supports and educational outcomes could not be clearer. Children burdened with the impacts of poverty and limited social capital have hurdles that most middle class families never imagine. In California over one quarter of all children live in poverty.<sup>3</sup> For Latinos and African Americans, that number is one in three. Fifty-eight percent of California children are poor enough to be eligible to receive free or reduced price school meals. In Los Angeles County that percentage rises to two out of three children.<sup>4</sup>

The impacts of lack of access to healthcare, community violence, and a pervasive lack of social capital are tremendous barriers for students who depend on access to quality education and college and career opportunities to climb out of poverty. Community schools provide on-the-ground, at-the-school, and in-the-neighborhood solutions to address these daunting barriers to learning.

We also know that the cycle of poverty contributes to the cycle of crime. At a time when we are trying to reduce our prison population and redirect investment to education instead of incarceration, the high poverty rate poses a major obstacle. The community schools strategy gives us the opportunity to identify at-risk kids early and intervene with support and services that can assist them and their families. That early investment will pay off in the long term.

In 2013 I held a statewide bus tour examining promising practices among community schools that are making a difference to address the challenges faced by so many of our young people and their families.<sup>5</sup> From Los Angeles to the Bay Area, in both urban, suburban and rural communities we heard from local community leaders who had built effective cross-agency partnerships to support children and families.

The groundwork for community schools is laid when a community comes together to build a common agenda around top priorities. That agenda will vary depending on the needs and strengths of each community. The drive to create that shared agenda can also vary. In Nashville, Tennessee the Chamber of Commerce took the lead. In Cincinnati, a non-profit led the charge along with the school board, and in Portland, Oregon it was the county. Here in California we see school districts like Oakland taking the lead or, as in Pasadena, sharing responsibilities with city government.

In my Senate District in Los Angeles County there are a growing number of local community schools initiatives. The Pasadena School/City/Community Work Plan<sup>6</sup> is an effort based on the Coalition for Community Schools' results framework.<sup>7</sup> The plan was adopted by the city council and school board in 2013 and has been the impetus for a range of new initiatives. Early meetings identified gaps in collaborative efforts and the silos typical in community institutions. All too familiar disconnects surfaced

such as city and school district departments that both worked with homeless families yet had minimal cross-agency interaction and coordination while serving the same clientele. The baggage of decades of institutional separation and wariness going back to the days of court ordered desegregation in the 1970's began to give way to a structured collaboration and jointly sponsored projects. The current focus of efforts between the School and City is the development of shared governance to ensure the work is sustained, remains relevant over time, and becomes a part of these two institutions' work together so that Pasadena students graduate college and career ready.

Because of the Pasadena Board of Education and City Council's commitment to the Plan, new and innovative partnership opportunities that support the shared mission are emerging. Two joint use gyms are under construction on school campuses that will have city programs in extended hours. However, deeper collaboration between the School and City demonstrate a movement to extend beyond joint use facilities to joint investments in purpose and mission. More recently, City Human Services and Recreation Department after school program staff were trained in early childhood education practices in a joint venture with nearby Pacific Oaks College. The city and schools in partnership with UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities are administering the Early Developmental Instrument; a population-based measure of early child development in five key domains to produce reliable citywide and neighborhood level data and maps representing children's health and development for planning and evaluation purposes.<sup>8</sup> With funding from the Pasadena YMCA the city and school district administered the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets survey to better target programs and services.<sup>9</sup> City administered Community Development Block Grants now give extra points for alignment to the School/City/Community Work Plan. These intentional coordinated community school efforts are a smarter way for communities to achieve measurable goals. They represent smarter, more effective government driven by local priorities. By building the organizational infrastructure at the state, county, city and school level we can leverage our scarce resources and utilize collective impact strategies to change communities.

My office is also engaged in developing the new California Community Schools Network. The intent of the network is to leverage California's unique assets to boost student achievement by promoting, supporting and enhancing collaboration between schools and their community partners. The California Community Schools Network will connect local community school efforts to each other and with statewide stakeholder and advocacy organizations to highlight and share information about impactful community school policies and practices. The network will build broader understanding and support for community schools among local and state-level policymakers and school and community leaders.

The launch of the California Community Schools Network builds on the recent transformative shift in state education funding and accountability. The new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has created a significant opportunity to expand community schools. LCFF represents a commitment to education equity. The new funding formula recognizes that foster youth, low-income students, and English language learners need additional resources to achieve their college and career dreams.<sup>10</sup> The ultimate goal is to close the achievement gap and assure access for all students to a quality education, with an emphasis on the whole child.

In addition to standard academic achievement measures, California educators now must also concentrate on areas such as student engagement, parent involvement and school climate. These broader state measures are a recognition that indicators such as chronic absence, suspension and parental participation rates are critical issues that schools must prioritize to move student achievement. Community schools are a highly effective way to improve all of these measures.

LCFF sets eight state priority areas that every district must address through their new Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). Community schools can leverage all of these. The development of the LCAP is designed to include significant parent and community input. LCAP priorities are driven by collaborative outreach to parents, students, teachers, and community members. Parent and community involvement and student engagement are critical elements in a quality educational experience and a central focus of community schools. The new local control framework in California provides a significant lever to expand community schools across the state and focus on education equity, and I am excited to continue to lead efforts to bring the community schools strategy to all schools in California.

## **U.S. Congressman Michael Honda, D-CA: Community Schools as a Scaffolding Strategy for Educational Equity**

Teachers everywhere will tell you about the importance of “scaffolding” in education. Scaffolding is the building of new learning on a framework of existing knowledge and experience. For example, while memorizing multiplication facts may be necessary, it is meaningless without context and application; it is nonsensical if you haven’t yet learned to add and subtract or count. Learning is not about filling a child’s brain with distinct, isolated chunks of knowledge or facts. Learning is ultimately about a child building a diverse and well-connected network of knowledge and experience upon which new understanding can reside. As a former teacher and principal, I know first-hand the importance of meeting students where they are, academically and in all other ways, and helping them to bring out the best in themselves.

Our children are similarly successful when they are provided with the rich human and fiscal resources they require. They are successful when they are provided with a strong and diverse network of interconnected resources. Community schools are a proven, scaffold-based model of success in education. They help to provide the structure of support that is essential for students who live in the worst poverty and need. Community schools’ focus on providing every child with holistic, wrap-around services and enriching opportunities will ultimately help to improve education for each and every child.

America has recognized the interconnectedness of schools and communities since the days of our first public schools. It is clear that schools improve and strengthen communities; in return communities, in the form of public and private entities, as well as individual actions, can improve and strengthen schools. Utilizing the school as a hub of activity empowers communities, and ultimately improves student performance. It is time for the federal government to increase its role in encouraging the development of community-based schools. The federal government has the ultimate responsibility to ensure that every child, in every community, regardless of the zip code in which they live, has access to the fiscal and human resources that schools can provide.

That is why I helped produce a 2013 report, *For Each and Every Child*, which highlights promising practices to close the achievement and opportunity gaps, and offers policy recommendations at the local, state, and federal levels to increase equity in our schools. Meeting the needs of high-poverty students is one area where the strong school-community partnerships found in community schools are a clearly effective strategy.<sup>11</sup> Our report highlighted the success of Cincinnati’s community learning centers (community schools) that the district has invested in. These centers have helped dramatically improve graduation rates, and have raised the expectations for young people and their families about what is possible for their futures. In particular, we highlighted the Oyler School, a preK-12 Cincinnati school that is home to the nation’s first school-based vision clinic, along with dental services, mental health counseling, and food assistance and adult education for families. Not long ago, 80% of students

from Oyler dropped out of school after grade 10. By 2010, the school's graduation rate had climbed to 82% due to the faithful implementation of the community school strategy.<sup>12</sup>

Part of my charge going forward from this commission is to introduce and enact legislation and funding to support strategies, like community schools, that we have identified as ways to give each and every child an excellent education. That is why Senator Bernard Sanders (I-VT) and I introduced the Supporting Community Schools Act (HR 3873/S 844).<sup>13</sup> This bipartisan act allows the community school model to be utilized as a turnaround strategy for schools that are labeled “in need of improvement.” This is a simple, no-additional-cost fix to federal policy. It is recognition that we cannot solve the problems in our education system by simply closing “bad” schools or firing “bad” teachers. The Supporting Community Schools Act reinforces the idea that we need to provide our teachers, schools, communities, and most importantly the children they serve, with the scaffolding provided by community based services.

The idea of community schools is cost-effective, broadly supported, and bipartisan in nature. In July 2014, Representatives Aaron Schock (R-IL) and Steny Hoyer (D-MD) introduced the Full Service Community Schools Act (HR 5168),<sup>14</sup> which I am cosponsoring. The bill authorizes funding for competitive grants to expand community schools across the country. It also would authorize funding for state collaboratives, comprised of state government and nonprofit agencies, to develop greater support and capacity for community schools at the state level.

My colleague, Representative Judy Chu (D-CA), has introduced the Developing Innovative Partnerships and Learning Opportunities that Motivate Achievement Act (HR 2237).<sup>15</sup> This bill would give states block grants to develop a statewide assets and needs assessment of youth outcomes that go beyond test scores to include school climate, access to full-day kindergarten and Advanced Placement classes, and more. The state would then create a plan in response to its assessment, and develop indicators to track their progress on various outcomes. Sub-grants would then go to local partnerships between school districts and nonprofits, community-based organizations, institutions of higher education, and other entities to replicate the same assessment and plan at the local level. Through this work, more schools can move toward the community school strategy as they seek to support and enrich their students' learning, through more than just academic achievement, in order to educate the whole child.

Since 2008, more than 30 million dollars have been awarded as grants to develop successful community schools, including \$10 million in Fiscal Year 2014, thanks in part to my work on the House Appropriations Committee. The work that has been completed so far, however, is simply not enough. The demand far outstrips the availability of funds. I applaud President Obama and Secretary Duncan for their administrative action and work to expand the community school strategy through the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative. It is time for Congress to take action and appropriately fund this proven solution by increasing the annual appropriations for the signature grant, the Full Service Community Schools program.

I want to help bring the success we see at Oyler School to all schools in my district, in California, and across the country. Every child and family deserves a community school where they can thrive, and where the community can gather and unite. Community schools are an old idea made new—to essentially make the school the center of the community and house various services and enriching opportunities all in one place. As a former principal, I know the value of adequate dental and vision services for students; of after-school opportunities that motivate children to wake up in the morning and come to school; and of a welcoming environment for families that allows them to learn and lead alongside their children. Community schools offer these attributes.

I will continue to work with my colleagues in Congress, and with my constituents from California, to garner support for policies and funding to help community schools expand to more children, families, and communities across the country. I hope you will join me in this venture to elevate community schools into our national discourse of what really works to achieve both equity and excellence in education.

## Conclusion: Bipartisan Momentum for Community Schools

Our joint state and federal public policy goals should be to provide cross-agency collaboration among government institutions, remove barriers and provide incentives for the development of community schools, secure a sustainable funding stream, and design a rational accountability system that allows innovation while promoting the use of best practices throughout the state and the nation.

The recent bipartisan introduction of the Full Service Community Schools Act (HR 5168) in the House illustrates that community schools represent a strategy that everyone can support. They lend themselves to local ownership and development, offer a proven strategy to pursue greater educational equity for all young people, and honor families and communities as vital partners in the success of their neighborhood schools. We cannot imagine a more intuitive, equitable, and promising strategy for school improvement and neighborhood revitalization, and we are thrilled that Representatives Hoyer and Schock have come together on this bill and through a recent joint commentary in Education Week to champion community schools.<sup>16</sup> We are excited and honored to continue to advocate for more schools to become community schools, both in California and nationwide, for we feel that all young people should experience the same degree of success, support and pride that we see occurring in community schools every day.

## Notes

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13. Supporting Community Schools Act of 2013, <https://beta.congress.gov/113/bills/hr3873/BILLS-113hr3873ih.pdf>.
14. Full Service Community Schools Act, <https://beta.congress.gov/113/bills/hr5168/BILLS-113hr5168ih.pdf>.
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16. The Honorable Steny Hoyer and the Honorable Aaron Schock, A Bipartisan Argument for Full-Service Community Schools. Education Week, July 28, 2014. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/07/28/37hoyer.h33.html>.