

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS:

a full-spectrum resource

Meeting the needs of the whole child is the goal of community schools, which partner with other agencies to offer a range of services and opportunities.

**R**ecess ends and second-grader Ivana returns to her classroom, out of breath and a little more winded than usual. She and her 29 classmates head back into the room to start a math lesson and before long, Ivana is heavily wheezing. Not sure of what might be wrong, the teacher sends Ivana to the office, where the secretary thinks the child might be having an asthma attack. After calming the child down, the secretary calls 911 and an ambulance and fire truck are dispatched while Ivana's parents leave work to meet her at the emergency room.

Now imagine this same scenario if Ivana was educated at a full-service school, one with linked "community" services. She would have headed to the health center, where a medical staffer would have worked through the attack using Ivana's inhaler and perhaps a nebulizer treatment. Thirty minutes later, Ivana would have been back in class learning, the city's fire and ambulance

staff would have been freed up for more pressing emergencies, and Ivana's parents would have remained at work, pulling in the income to feed their struggling family of six.

This is just one example of how schools with linked services, otherwise known as community schools, are able to provide for the needs of students, minimizing the impact on instructional time.

## What are community schools?

A community school is not a program. It's a way of doing business – a collaborative approach to supporting student success by offering a range of services and opportunities such as physical and mental health services, after-school and summer programming, and family engagement and

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*By David Gomez, Lisa Gonzales, Deanna Niebuhr  
and Lisa Villarreal*

support services. Through very deliberate partnerships, a community school strives to be a full-spectrum resource for families and children, reflecting the needs and assets of the community and becoming a center of community life.

Across the country, the community schools approach is gaining renewed consideration as key to addressing the complexity of the achievement gap. In a community schools approach, school districts and local government agencies join forces to align their resources and expertise to make sure every student has the academic, health and social supports necessary to succeed in school.

Partner agencies recognize that for students to be successful, the needs of the whole child must be met. The partners work together to identify and understand the needs of children and their families, and coordinate and leverage the necessary resources to address those needs.

Much can be learned from what these schools have achieved, specifically in the areas of governance, prioritization based on data, the role of summer learning, and scaling up. The theory of action is that child well-being (i.e. the absence of hunger, fear, illness, pain, neglect or abuse) is necessary for quality education to truly be absorbed.

### **Where we were**

Child well-being seemed to be a higher education priority in earlier decades. In the years immediately following the former Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the spacecraft that beat America into orbit, there was an unprecedented race to bring state-of-the-art science and mathematics into every classroom. The Presidential Physical Fitness Tests were mandatory and served as an impetus for more rigor in recess and physical education.

Programs stemming from the "war on poverty" and the "great society" ensured food, income and housing security for America's most vulnerable families. Head Start sites opened up across the country. The operation of the U.S. Department of Education as a branch of Health, Education and Welfare provided for social workers, school nurses, school psychologists, and later bi-



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lingual and instructional aides for our most disadvantaged students.

And economists noted that America's gaps in income, taxation, employment, housing and education were the narrowest our country has ever seen (Heckman & Kruger, 2005). It is no coincidence that from 1960-1978, American schools were rated among the best in the world, and California schools were the national envy. They were packed with safety-nets and wrap-around supports; these services and opportunities are bundled today in the term "community schools."

Unfortunately, by the time Proposition 13 passed in 1978, the majority of these community school strategies had been defunded in favor of tax breaks, and the gaps they began to close are now the widest in nearly 80 years.

California has a long history of community school development through the Healthy Start program, established in 1991 through the Healthy Start Support Services for Children Act (SB 620). The Healthy

Start initiative gave grants as seed funding for school districts to provide comprehensive, collaborative, school-linked supports and services to improve the health and academic performance of children, youth and their families.

Between 1992 and 2006, the California Department of Education awarded more than 1,400 planning and operational grants to districts and their collaborative partners, reaching more than 3,100 schools sites and one million students (CDE Healthy Start Fact Sheet, 2010).

### **Sustaining the services**

While Healthy Start funding has since languished, the strategy has shown great potential. An early evaluation of Healthy Start showed improved math and reading test scores as well as decreased student mobility (Wagner & Golan, 1996). Many Healthy Start sites sustained their services after the end of their state grant funding (Halfon *et al.*, 2001).

Lake County Healthy Start started at one elementary school, established with the support of a Healthy Start grant in 1991. It now serves 20 schools in all seven of the county's school districts. "In the past school year, Healthy Start served over 2,500 students and their families, providing support, encouragement and practical assistance to help ensure the students of Lake County have what they need to succeed in school," reports Wally Holbrook, superintendent, Lake County Office of Education.

Indeed, many efforts launched with Healthy Start grants are alive and well today – efforts that were not only sustained but even expanded, in some cases district-wide.

### Building a governance infrastructure

The success of a community schools effort is directly correlated with the strength of the infrastructure supporting its partnerships. Time and resources must be devoted to establishing working relationships among partners and creating systems that allow partners to collaboratively assess needs, share resources and make decisions. While developing these relationships and systems is time-consuming and may not address immediate community needs, it is a critical initial step to develop a community school effort.

Discussions about filling service gaps and determining which services should be offered need to take place after each partner understands the purpose and role of the collaboration. In other words, decisions about the "how to work together" are made before the decisions about "what to do."

The Redwood City School District operates four community schools with onsite family resource centers and offers extended-

**R**esearch confirms that students do worse in school if they are not in class to learn (*Attendance Works, 2011*).

■ An analysis of chronically absent kindergarten students revealed a lower subsequent academic performance in grade 1 than their peers, with reading scores for Latino children the most affected.

■ Among low-income children who lack the resources to make up for time on task, chronic kindergarten absences translated into lower achievement in grade 5.

■ By grade 6, chronic absence can be associated with dropping out of school.

■ By grade 9, missing 20 percent of school can be a better predictor of dropout than grade 8 test scores.

day services at eight other sites. While the district is the lead agency, the community school effort is a joint initiative of Redwood City 2020 (RC2020) – a formal partnership established in 1999 between San Mateo County, the City of Redwood City, the Redwood City School District, and the Sequoia Union High School District.

RC2020 started as an "umbrella" to address in a more coordinated way the multiple issues facing students and families in Redwood City. Over time, other partners have joined, including the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Stanford University) and foundations that serve the role of critical funding partners.

RC2020's structure follows a key best practice for governance. An infrastructure

for partnering is established at the leadership/policy, executive/management and site levels. At each level, partner agencies populate a partner team with a person(s) with the appropriate expertise and decision-making power. RC2020 has a coordinating council that sets the policy direction, an executive cabinet that makes management decisions, and two staff, including an executive director and administrative assistant.

The executive director works with site coordinators and community-based providers to implement the initiative at the school sites. RC2020's collaborative approach ensures that all the partners stay committed to the vision and its implementation. "It is part of our culture and way of doing business that has outlasted changes in leadership at all levels," said Shelly Masur, school board member in the Redwood City School District.

In addition to providing funding for its core initiatives, each of the RC2020 partners contribute \$25,000 annually to convene RC2020 and pay for the two staff that manage its initiatives. Having this infrastructure in place has allowed RC2020 to maintain and build on its community schools initiative even through agency leadership change and severe budget cuts. The Redwood City School District estimates that its return on investment for its \$25,000 is approximately \$2.5 million in services (Bookmyer & Niebuhr, 2011).

### Shared goals and priorities

It is very common in the evolution of the community school efforts that the collaboration starts by offering the services partners bring with them to the table. While offering services at or via a school can improve the accessibility of those services, it does not guarantee that these are the supports that families need or want most. Nor does it guarantee that even if they are the right services, families will access them.

Crucial steps for building a community school that is responsive to the community include assessment, planning, and family and community engagement in the planning process. To ensure that the engagement is authentic, investments in capacity-building

Continued on page 37

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# How community schools are closing the gap

## Continued from page 30

for families and other community members can provide a good foundation to build on.

The planning process relies on useful data for assessing community needs and assets. Mapping patterns in chronic absence can provide a good foundation for assessing both community needs and assets. Chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more excused or unexcused days over the course of the school year, is a proven early warning sign for both academic failure and dropping out of school (Chang & Romero, 2003). It is important to address chronic absenteeism because research confirms that students do worse in school if they are not in class to learn.

Patterns in absenteeism and a close look at the reasons for absenteeism can provide a very reliable map of student and community needs. Chronic absence reflects the degree to which schools, communities and families are adequately addressing the needs of children and youth.

At Oakland Unified School District, Superintendent Tony Smith has employed a district-wide focus on attendance. Recognizing the power of data to drive reform, Smith's first step was changing the attendance reports provided to principals to include individual student data, which highlights chronic absence. Principals receive training on how to work with service providers to address what keeps students from attending school regularly (Attendance Works, 2011).

## Why summer matters

The research on summer learning loss elevates summer programming as a critical issue. Summer learning loss is the debilitating result of an absence of summer learning and enrichment. Research shows low-income children to be nearly three grade equivalents behind their more affluent peers in reading by the end of the fifth grade as a result of summer learning loss (National Summer Learning Association, 2009).

In addition, unequal summer learning opportunities during elementary school

years are responsible for about two-thirds of the ninth-grade achievement gap between lower- and higher-income youth (Alexander *et. al.*, 2007). Clearly, the cumulative effects of summer learning loss contribute directly to a widening of the achievement gap between low-income and middle-income students.

As the budget situation grows more severe, the need for partners to pool their resources to provide meaningful summer

areas for districts to choose from, and each area could arguably constitute its very own initiative. It is important to start small, by both piloting at a few sites and by testing out and then expanding on some key strategies that have the greatest potential impact.

Equally important is for a community to set itself up not to climb a mountain in a relatively short time, but to go slow to go fast. Indeed, many Healthy Start efforts still serving children and families today started



programs becomes even more critical. Mt. Diablo Unified School District offers up to six weeks of summer programming at 16 sites serving more than 2,000 students. Programs include a mix of academic (science, math, computer lab, etc.) and enrichment activities (fitness, nutrition, gardening and field trips).

A close partnership with the city of Concord's parks and recreation department enables the district to provide this rich array of summer opportunities. The city contributes a considerable amount of its own resources by jointly hiring and training the site coordinators and recreation specialists.

## Start small and scale up

Contemplating the breadth of what might be possible to create community schools can be daunting. The request for proposals for the federal Full Service Community Schools Grants listed 12 service

at a single school site and now serve entire districts or even entire counties.

For example, Ontario-Montclair School District (K-8) launched its collaborative effort in 1997 with a series of Healthy Start grants and currently serves all 32 schools in the district. Students and families are connected to services through outreach staff at each school site and a network of family resource centers.

Through ongoing strategic planning and community assessments, the district and its partners have built on their family resource center-based strategy to methodically add school sites and additional services over time. This past winter, OMSD opened a new family resource center with Mental Health Services Act – Prevention and Early Intervention funds and a building donated by the city of Montclair using redevelopment funds.

"A range of services are needed to ensure

Community Schools meet the needs of an under-resourced community,” said James Hammond, superintendent of Ontario-Montclair School District. “This includes universal prevention services like after-school programming and parent education to targeted intervention services like case management and counseling services for children and families. One of the most important things we have done for sustainability of these support systems is to develop them over time and in partnership with local government and nonprofit agencies.”

### Moving forward

So where do we go from here? The Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in K-16 education. Coalition members contribute to a broad perspective: youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy as well as national, state and local community school networks (Coalition for Community Schools, 2011).

In May 2012, the Coalition is bringing its national forum to San Francisco. The forum will provide opportunities for California communities to learn from each other, as well as from communities from across the country about how to do this work. A special ACSA-sponsored strand will provide opportunities for school leaders to begin the conversation about how to start community schools in their districts, with help from superintendents statewide who have already embarked on this journey.

### Online forum to connect school leaders

ACSA is in an excellent position to play a key leadership role in providing awareness, information and professional development to school leaders on the development and implementation of community partnerships with schools.

This spring, the California School Boards Association is launching the California Community Schools Network, an online forum to connect education leaders statewide who are building partnerships between schools, counties, cities, non-profits,

businesses and community organizations. There is great collaborative work going on in California, and this mobilization of community resources is critical for supporting the education and well-being of our children. As budgets continue to decrease for all sectors that serve students, it is essential that

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we find ways to both educate and provide critical services to our students. Community schools serve as an excellent strategy to accomplish this important mission. ■

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*David Gomez is ACSA's president-elect and president of the California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators. Lisa Gonzales is ACSA's vice president for legislative action. Deanna Niebuhr is director of the Community Schools Initiative at the Partnership for Children and Youth. Lisa Villarreal is education officer at the San Francisco Foundation and led the California Healthy Start Field Office at U.C. Davis for nearly 10 years. The authors were part of a California delegation to New York City to study and visit community schools and work on these policy issues in California, in conjunction with CSBA and the California Department of Education.*

## Addendum

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### Please note

Under the section *Building a governance infrastructure*, the article states: “The Redwood City School District estimates that its return on investment for its \$25,000 is approximately \$2.5 million in services (Bookmyer & Niebuhr, 2011).”

### Clarification

To more accurately reflect the Redwood City School District’s investment and leveraging of funds the statement should read: “For 2010, the Redwood City School District estimated that with an initial investment of \$190,000 in general funds it was able to leverage a return of approximately \$2.5 million in services.”

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