
Why Full-Service Community Schools?



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THE NEED IN THE NATION

In the 2000 presidential election, education was the top-ranking issue among voters. Everyone has concerns about the quality of the educational system, and everyone has a different opinion on how to fix it. My own hypothesis is that in many communities, children face significant barriers to learning—barriers that schools acting alone cannot possibly overcome. But I believe that full-service community schools can dramatically reduce many of these barriers. What are some of the areas in which such schools can have an effect?

How Full-Service Community Schools Can Make a Difference

Readiness to Learn

Some children come to school lacking the necessary readiness to sit in the classroom and participate in the learning process. In some cases, the family does not encourage early learning or does not have the basic parenting skills to get the young child off to a good start. Early childhood education and Head Start preschool programs have a proven positive effect on long-term learning outcomes. Community schools can encompass early childhood learning centers and parent education classes. In addition, when the preschool program is located right in the school building, the transition to kindergarten and subsequent grades is easier.

Supportive Adults

Successful youth development is strongly associated with access to caring, supportive adults. Young people in all kinds of communities who are involved in negative behaviors (sex, drugs, violence) often lack any connection to responsible adults. On the other hand, young people who live in very deprived circumstances do much better if they experience consistent and sustained attachment to adults.

Community schools can ensure that such relationships are established. Partner agencies can help supply the large amount of individual attention that many of today's students need. Health care providers, case managers, additional social workers, and volunteer mentors can be brought into the school setting, and their services integrated with existing (and often minimal) pupil personnel services.

Extended Learning Opportunities

There is not enough time in the school day for many children to acquire all the skills they need to succeed in today's educational system. Opening the schools for longer hours and providing creative enrichment programs can help children make significant academic gains. In community schools, after-school activities can be integrated with the classroom curriculum, reinforcing and enriching what children learn each day. After-school programs also help children gain social skills and cultural experiences that lead to strong youth development.

Parent Involvement

Many parents are turned off by their children's schools; they feel rejected by the teachers and do not know how to communicate with them. Community schools develop many avenues for involvement, inviting parents to serve on planning and advisory boards, encouraging them to volunteer in the school, and hiring them as teacher's aides and outreach workers. In community schools, parents can also learn how to monitor their children's school performance and homework and therefore feel better equipped to provide support and help.

Lifelong Learning

Children are not the only ones who need access to extended learning opportunities. Adults can improve their family's status by taking courses to advance their careers or enhance their lives intellectually. English as a Second Language, basic GED, and computer use are among the most sought-after adult education classes. Welfare reform is also increasing the pressure on young mothers to further their education so they can enter the labor force. Community schools, open evenings and weekends, can become accessible and convenient centers for both credit and noncredit courses, and child care can be provided on site.

Opportunity to Perform Community Service

Many children and their families feel alienated from their communities. When they are given a chance to serve the community through volunteer placements in day care centers, senior citizen homes, or community gardening projects, children feel much better about their lives. Community schools can facilitate these service learning placements and ensure that the knowledge gained from the work experience goes back into the classroom. The events of September 11, 2001 brought into focus the importance of developing a sense of community and of teaching children to actively participate in building democratic institutions.

Access to Health Care

Children who are troubled with physical or psychosocial problems cannot perform well in school. Asthma is widespread among the school-age population, as are acne, headaches, and illnesses as minor as colds and as major as tuberculosis. Many children suffer from stress-related symptoms and need mental health services and counseling.

Community schools can encompass on-site primary health and mental health clinics staffed with trained professionals from community agencies. Dental offices can also be set up. These collaborating partners can also assume the responsibility for health education and promotion. For example, they can offer sex education, drug prevention, and conflict resolution classes, freeing teachers to concentrate on their classroom work with students.

Integration of Services

Many families are discouraged from using community services because these services are fragmented and loaded with bureaucratic regulations. Agencies may have widely separated locations, conflicting policies about who can receive services, and little communication with other services used by clients. A well-organized community school can draw these disparate programs together into an integrated package at one site with centralized records and common policies.

Safe Communities

Of the 28 million school-age children whose parents work, an estimated 7 million children aged 5 to 13 return to empty homes after school. Community schools can provide safe and supervised havens from early in the morning to late in the evening.

Positive School Environment

When a traditional school system is confronted with young people who act out and misbehave, it quickly suspends them, adding to the number of high-risk youth in the streets. But being thrown out of school for a time exacerbates the students' problem rather than solving it, because they fall even further behind, both academically and socially. Community schools can create service networks that deal with problem behaviors on site, limiting suspensions and expulsions. When students perceive the school setting as "on their side," they are more likely to become attached to the school community and adopt positive attitudes and actions. When parents feel connected to the school, they are more ready to work with the teachers to improve student outcomes.

Changing Demographics

Throughout the country, schools are experiencing dramatic changes in the makeup of their populations. The largest increases are among Hispanic children, but more and more students from Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world are changing the composition of the student body. Ensuring that children learn English is only one of the challenges resulting from these changes. Often, cultural differences emerge that must be addressed; for example, asking parents to help with homework may be futile if they speak little or no English.

Because partners in community schools often are community-based, culturally indigenous organizations, they can create multicultural environments that celebrate differences and encourage all children to succeed. They may organize music and art activities and family festivals to help people share their cultural heritages with each other.

Basic Needs

Many children come to school hungry; they may also lack clothing and housing. Traditional school systems are not set up to meet these needs. Community schools can institute breakfast, snack, and dinner programs as well as the

usual lunch. Community partners can take on the responsibility of making sure that children have warm and suitable clothing and help parents find adequate housing. Such supports can be provided in the context of a family resource center that ensures confidentiality without stigmatization.

Quality Education

Last, but by no means least, too many children are failing in school. Many are left back, and some never complete their high school education. Whether this represents the failure of the students or the failure of the schools to meet the students' needs is a debatable point. In any case, schools are under fire to produce higher test scores. Community schools work to create a more effective school environment, encouraging small classes with well-trained teachers and high standards. With partners from community agencies to address behavioral and social issues, teachers can concentrate on teaching. All the outside programs that are brought into the schoolhouse through such partnerships can be shaped to enhance learning and integrated with the school's classroom curricula.

Observations

In general, community schools call for a balance between educational enrichment and human support mechanisms. However, some initiatives concentrate more on the "full service" part of the equation, while others start with school reform ideas and later add services. No two community schools look exactly alike. As advocates are fond of saying, "No cookie cutters."

In every community, at least some of the children experience barriers to learning. In wealthy suburbs, a handful of young people may live on the margins of society or have troubled relationships with their parents. In more disadvantaged neighborhoods, the majority of the children may come to school unprepared to learn, lacking attention to their basic needs, and suffering from the fragmentation of services endemic in poverty areas. Each community is unique, and although community schools have common overall goals, they address the specific issues differently, depending on the barriers that must be overcome, the environment of the school, the wishes of the parents, the skills of the existing staff, and the resources available in the community to build a stronger institution.

We do not know how many full-service community schools there are in this country. We do know that thousands of schools have instituted relevant pieces, such as extended hours, primary health care centers, or family resource centers. Many of them have evolved into fully realized full-service community schools as the pieces are integrated into a comprehensive model. We know too that of the 85,000 public schools in the United States, about one in four—nearly 22,000—have student populations in which more than half the children are very poor. Given the potential capability of community schools to improve educational outcomes, further healthy youth development, and help disadvantaged families,

it would seem wise social policy to consider these emerging models for broad replication and adoption.

THE NEED IN BENNINGTON, VERMONT, IN 1995

We have always been led to believe that a child can rise above his or her bleak life of poverty through a strong education. After all, that is the American dream. But over time, what has become apparent to us at Molly Stark is the difficulty of equalizing the huge imbalance in opportunity between poor children and their more affluent peers. We have found over and over again that many children of poverty lack the fundamental support network necessary to thrive in school. They become “at risk” the minute they are born: at risk for low literacy skills, at risk for school and job failure, and at risk for a continuing life of poverty. Clearly, parents raising a family in poverty love their children, but their dreams and hopes for them seem to diminish over time. Many of these children enter adulthood not ready to participate in a meaningful way as members of their own families and communities. And so the cycle continues.

School problems are not just school problems. That is, the challenges our schools face every day are actually challenges facing our families, our communities, and our country. There is no debating the fact that good instruction, a carefully designed curriculum, high standards, and strong professional development are essential elements of excellent schools. However, even when some of these things are not in place, many middle-class children will learn, progress, and be successful. These are the children who receive much support, experience, and opportunity in their everyday lives.

Conversely, even when excellent curriculum and instruction are present, many children of poverty do poorly in school. No matter how competent the teaching is, how high the standards bar is raised, how dazzling the materials are, how much teachers sincerely want to teach, roadblocks appear. Anyone who has taught in a classroom knows that many ongoing factors affect a child’s performance. If a child is chronically ill or lives with daily head lice, it is hard for her to concentrate. If a child has not had positive role models to help him understand the importance of hard work and appropriate social behavior, he has no building blocks for positive and productive behaviors. If a child has not had strong early language development or enriching opportunities before entering kindergarten, she is at a clear disadvantage and may never catch up. What a paradox this is. The greatest amount of academic growth is expected from the children who enter school the least prepared and with the least amount of support.

What We Learned

We started our journey toward a full-service community school because of a large group of staff members who wanted to learn more and wanted to make a difference. Beginning in 1995, for almost a year, we researched and discussed

information before we started providing extended services. Here are some things we learned:

More than half the students at Molly Stark live in poverty. Overall, these children, many of whom live in overcrowded subsidized housing, have poorer health, enter school thousands of words behind middle-class peers, are more likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to be abused or neglected. We were especially struck by the rate at which our former students drop out of high school. On average, 15 percent of the students in each high school class in Bennington spent their elementary years at Molly Stark. Yet in 1996, when we first collected dropout data, 28 percent of the dropouts in that year had attended Molly Stark. We knew that something had to change!

These kids have fewer opportunities. The data we collected verified our impression that many poor children come to school with less preschool experience and have fewer after-school opportunities once they start school. We found that many parents (and, unfortunately, some teachers) have lower expectations of what these children are capable of doing.

Some of the existing services are poorly integrated. It is sometimes difficult to develop good communication between school and community service providers. Families with children in need are certainly offered various kinds of help, including home-based therapeutic services (such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech), early intervention for special education services, family advocacy, and adult education and support. But too many families are being served in isolation, with unnecessary duplication of services and duplication of paperwork. Families might have to travel to several individual agencies for categorical services or have their homes invaded by many individual service providers. Often, parents are so confused by the number of providers they work with that they can't identify which agency a worker came from or what the worker's role is. In our experience, agencies would call our school to ask why we weren't communicating with them, only to learn that school personnel didn't even know they were involved in a family's life.

We concluded what we already knew: As hard as we were trying, what we were doing often wasn't working. We needed to look outside our box for different ways to work with the community to serve children and families.

During the 1990s, there was much talk in education circles about national goals. We began to hear phrases like "readiness to learn," "demonstrated competency," "continuous improvement," and "disciplined environment conducive to learning."

To those of us on the front lines at Molly Stark in 1995, those were just words. We knew that we hadn't come close to reaching such goals. If we were to create real change, we couldn't treat this problem as just an education issue. It was time to mobilize our community to promote opportunities for responsible parenthood, guarantee quality child care and preschool experiences, and ensure the healthy development of children. It was time to develop a systematic

approach to doing what was simply right and fair for children and families. Only then would real reform take place.

What We Knew When We Began

We compete for funds. Funding is often categorical, and agencies and schools that work with children and families are constantly competing just to provide the minimum. If we can pool our funds, sharing responsibility and skills, the result will be a much more efficient and successful system of care and education.

The earlier the intervention, the better. The first five years of life is a critical time for cognitive and emotional growth. Without enriching and appropriate interventions during those years, children will remain at an extreme disadvantage.

Quality depends on funding. There is a direct correlation between high-quality services and positive student outcomes. Yet though our goal is to always provide high-quality services, we are often put in the position of doing what we can until the money runs out or of diluting what we're doing and not providing all the critical elements necessary to do a quality job.

Services must be intense and over a long period. Quantity does make a difference. Too often, because of a lack of funding or a lack of human resources, we do only a small piece of what is needed with the attitude that it is better than nothing. However, there is no quick fix for the consequences of poverty; that small piece isn't enough.

Services must be comprehensive. Health care, child care, preschool, parent education and support, having caring and competent adults with the children—all these are essentials in the formula for success.

Services must address the whole family. Children live and learn within the context of a family, and a family lives and learns within the context of a community. We need a multigenerational strategy that encourages parents and provides them with the skills they need to help their children do well in school and in life.

We decided our goal was to set the same standard for all children in our school-enriching experiences at an early age, adequate health care, and access to appropriate and nurturing adults. These services would begin to narrow the gaps and, in turn, would strengthen the community of which our school was a part.