

Alliance for Quality Education: Agenda for School Improvement

Our students need the supports provided by Community Schools

As critical as good teachers and rigorous standards are to improving student achievement, there is no silver bullet for student success. Too often, the education policy debate fails to acknowledge the complexity of the task. We ask schools to educate, nurture, and prepare students for college and careers; mediate, intervene, differentiate, organize, exercise, coordinate, communicate, train, discipline and celebrate our children. Then, we cut their budgets and complain when large numbers of uniquely challenged and gifted students don't get the individualized help that they need and deserve.

Schools alone can't do it all. This is particularly true in low-income communities, where resources are scarce and yet, students need more, not less. As our report shows¹, hundreds of thousands of public school students start out with less and end further behind their peers in more affluent schools.

We need to "break down the walls" of our traditional public schools, and to re-envision them as the community institutions that they have been in the past. This is the goal of the national movement for "Community Schools."

In a his "Urban Agenda," NY Governor Andrew Cuomo cited the roles of Community Schools,² and vowed to work with the U.S. Department of Education to secure federal funding for the expansion of Community Schools in New York. The Alliance for Quality Education agrees that this expansion should be a key educational priority for the new Governor, and that it should be targeted and coordinated with other education reforms being considered by the legislature.

What Are Community Schools?

Community Schools serve, not just as academic entities, but as "opportunity hubs" for entire neighborhoods—bringing together a range of agencies, services and providers to address the specific needs and interests of students, families and local residents. Community Schools are community institutions, remaining open into the night and on weekends, so that students, parents and neighbors can access basic health care, English or citizenship classes, tutors and other academic supports, internships, community service opportunities and much more. The types of supports offered at Community Schools vary depending on the needs of the neighborhood and the capacity of the school district and city to coordinate services.

Research has consistently shown that community schools contribute to increased student academic performance, lower drop-out rates, higher attendance rates, fewer behavior problems and greater parent engagement than in schools not organized as community schools.

¹ Alliance for Quality Education (2011) *Unequal Opportunity = Unequal Results*

² "Urban Agenda – the New NY Agenda," Andrew Cuomo, 2010.

Importantly, Community Schools are owned and managed by parents, students, educators and service providers. Creating a Community School involves engaging a wide range of partners in a process of building a collective vision for—not just an educational program, but a strong community.

The National Coalition for Community Schools (www.communityschools.org) provides support to districts and states in developing Community Schools programs. NCCS also conducts and compiles research on the impact of Community Schools. That research has consistently shown that Community Schools contribute to increased student academic performance, lower drop-out rates, higher attendance rates, fewer behavior problems and greater parent engagement than in schools not organized as Community Schools.³

Profiles and Results⁴

CINCINNATI, OHIO

Oyler Community Learning Center (OCLC) serves almost 900 students in grades pre-K through 12th in the Appalachian community of Lower Price Hill. The school was built through the efforts of an engaged community, threatened with the closing of their local elementary school. Supported by the Cincinnati Public Schools, local residents took years to create a collective vision, develop a plan and bring together partners to build OCLC.

OCLC is co-located in a Boys & Girls Club building, and also includes a school-based health center, in partnership with the City Health Department. The Boys & Girls Club provides a full-time resource coordinator for the school. Dozens of community partners have been brought together to create a comprehensive program: a local foodbank organizes the “Kid’s Café” which serves free hot meals in the evening. Full health services are provided, including dental care and vision screenings for all students. The Boys & Girls Club offers a “Teen Center” in the evenings, which provides academic tutoring, job training, college resources, and a lounge and study area. The Cincinnati Youth Collaborative matches volunteers and students for one-on-one mentoring and tutoring. A College Access Center offers college tours for students beginning in 7th grade.

Oyler’s combination of academic and social supports has paid off: Not a single student has dropped out of its high school program in the past two years. Over 150 former drop-outs have been “re-captured” and are now engaged with the program. But as importantly, says a consultant with the Cincinnati Public Schools, “The repositioning of schools as the centers of community has resulted in the realignment of resources that allow for sustainable partnerships accountable to shared school-community outcomes. Students, teachers, families and communities are setting their own goals, selecting their own partners, and finding their own pathways to success.”

PHILADELPHIA, PA

Sayre High School engages hundreds of youth and community members in its school-day, after-school and summer programs. Through a partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, the school offers a health-sciences focus in its curriculum. Each year, over 350 University of Pennsylvania students work at Sayre as co-learners, tutors and role models for younger students.

³ **Community Schools –Results That Turn Around Failing Schools:** Test Scores, Attendance, Graduation and College-Going Rates. National Coalition for Community Schools, May 2010. Available at: http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Turning_Around_Schools_CS_Results2.pdf

⁴ These profiles are adapted from Axelroth, R. (2009) *The Community Schools Approach: Raising Graduation and College Going Rates—Community High School Case Studies*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership.

Sayre teachers work to coordinate their lesson plans with University of Pennsylvania student fellows, who provide support in the classroom to keep students actively engaged. Sayre's science curriculum focuses on hands-on inquiry and small group learning. A cohort of 10th graders from Sayre travel to the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine to continue their studies in university laboratories.

Sayre stays open until 8 p.m. for its students, as well as students in its feeder schools. Students can receive free mentoring, and intensive supports for college and career readiness. In addition, the school has a nutrition and garden program, where students can get job experience, healthy eating classes, and more. A health center opened in 2007, funded through federal grants. Students, community members are welcome at the center, which provides both clinical and educational services. U/Penn doctors and medical students staff the clinic.

Sayre has an active youth council and a community advisory board to provide ongoing feedback on programs, resources, outreach and organizing efforts. The work has paid off: Sayre's first senior class of 80 students had a 90% graduation rate, and 56% enrolled in post-secondary education.

The programs and design of community schools like these varies depending on the resources and needs of the local communities. What these, and other community schools have in common are broad participation by a wide range of providers, intensive coordination and collaboration between the school, its teachers and leaders, and outside partners, and the active engagement of the surrounding community, students and parents—an *insistence* that the community own and operate the school to meet their needs.

Overcoming the Challenges of Establishing Community Schools

We recognize that Community Schools are expensive. But most community schools are able to leverage resources from a wide range of providers—from local agencies such as city health departments and Boys & Girls Clubs to the business community to foundations and federal and state funding. In fact, by breaking out of the walls of a traditional school, community schools are able to pull together resources that traditional schools cannot.

We need to support these efforts.

Resources

The best resource by far on community schools is the National Coalition for Community Schools, based in Washington, DC. The coalition has extensive materials, studies, compilations of research, and case studies of community schools around the country. www.communityschools.org.

In New York, the Children's Aid Society is a great resource on community schools in New York. www.childrengroups.org/communityschools