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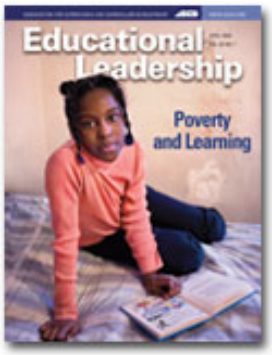

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Centers of Hope

Full-service community schools can improve the lives of children in poverty.

Joy G. Dryfoos

Schools are often blamed for the ubiquitous achievement gap between low-income children and their wealthier peers. But schools alone cannot fix a society that allows poor children to fail. To address the achievement gap in a meaningful way, we need to reach beyond the traditional school boundaries, involving the community in combating the effects of poverty on children and their families.

Full-service community schools are designed to do just that. According to Jane Quinn, Director of the Children's Aid Society's community schools effort, "Community schools *are* a poverty program" (personal communication, October 20, 2007).

A full-service community school remains open for extended hours, weekends, and summers, welcoming families and community members into the building for an array of services and activities provided by community agencies. Needs related to physical and mental health, dentistry, social services, after-school activities, and educational enrichment are addressed on-site. Usually, one community agency takes the lead and acts as the school's partner. A full-time coordinator from that agency works closely with the principal and the school staff to coordinate the services community agencies provide with what goes on in classrooms.

Growth of a Movement

The community-school concept is not really new. One hundred years ago in Chicago, John Dewey and Jane Addams were promoting collaboration and community involvement. Dewey believed that

> the significant thing is to make the school …a centre of full and adequate social service [and] to bring it into the current of social life. (Dewey, 1978, p. 80)

The popularity of Dewey's model of the school as a "centre of social service" has varied during the 20th century. The latest wave of community schools started in the early 1990s. Between 3,000 and 5,000 full-service community schools are now in operation across the United States, according to one estimate (Wolfe, 2007).

My own discovery of community schools took place in 1992 at the Salome Urena Middle

Academies (Intermediate School 218) in the Washington Heights area of New York City (Dryfoos, 1994). My work on high-risk behavior had led me to conclude that specialized prevention programs addressing such issues as drugs, sex, and violence were not sufficient to change the prospects for many children and youth at risk of failure (Dryfoos & Barkin, 2006). Along with enhanced educational opportunities, disadvantaged children also needed stronger supports. I was looking for an approach that would bring together all the health and social services disadvantaged children need and integrate them with instructional interventions and family involvement. I heard about the Children's Aid Society model at a meeting of the Carnegie Foundation's Task Force on Youth Development and wasted no time in arranging a visit.

Washington Heights had all the conditions typical of a poor inner-city community: many new immigrants, low-wage jobs, two or three families sharing one apartment, substance abuse and trafficking, and high rates of teen pregnancy. In response to these problems, the Children's Aid Society, a large social agency, had created a community school model in partnership with the New York City school system (Moses, 2005).

Intermediate School 218, serving students in grades 5–8, was open for extended hours and offered a wide range of services. It had a health clinic with dental care (and later, mental health and eye care); an extensive after-school and evening program; significant parental involvement; and community-service projects that linked the classroom with the neighborhood. When I visited, I was impressed by the quality of the after-school program and amazed at the number of parents involved in school activities.

This design was replicated in a number of schools in the city, and the Children's Aid Society developed a technical-assistance capacity that has served hundreds of schools and communities in the United States and abroad.

At about the same time, similar programs were popping up across the United States, all designed to address the problems of disadvantaged youth and their families by extending school hours and bringing partners into the schools (Dryfoos, 1994). These initiatives included Full-Service Schools in Florida; Healthy Start sites in California; Beacons in New York City; United Way's Bridges to Success in Indianapolis; the C. S. Mott Foundation in Flint, Michigan; the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania; and many others. In 1998, all this activity led to the formation of a national organization—the Coalition for Community Schools—within the Institute for Educational Leadership. Today more than 150 organizations are partner-members of the Coalition and are developing districtwide and statewide strategies to promote full-service community schools.

The Chicago Story

Chicago Public Schools, one of the largest school systems in the United States, serves more than 400,000 students in 613 schools. The district has become home to the largest community schools initiative in the United States and is emerging as "the testing ground for the community schools concept" (Wolfe, 2007, p. 3). Superintendent Arne Duncan articulated the school system's rationale for creating community schools:

> Our schools are absolutely safe havens. … So what better place to engage the entire community and to get families working together, learning together? …As our schools become community centers, we're convinced that it is going to be extraordinarily beneficial to our students long-term. (Duncan, 2003)

Although various foundations and nonprofit organizations had been promoting community-school efforts in the city for many years—ever since the Polk Brothers Foundation implemented its Full Service Schools Initiative in 1966—it wasn't until 2002 that Chicago Public Schools formalized its efforts at the district level by establishing the Community Schools Initiative. By fall 2007, 115 community schools had opened their doors, and 25 more were in the works; 83 percent were elementary or middle schools, and the rest were high schools. These public schools have been transformed into centers of their communities, where families have access to medical and dental care, children take music and art lessons in enriched after-school programs, and parents receive job training.

Each school partners with at least one nonprofit organization, such as a Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, or Hull House. The school building remains open in the afternoon and evening, on weekends, and into the summer. Each community school establishes a representative oversight committee or advisory board that is responsible for monitoring the programs that take place in the building. This group surveys students, parents, and teachers to find out what they would like to see offered at the school. A full-time site coordinator facilitates communication and coordination. The community school must link the social support programs to the school's academic program.

Funding

When Chicago launched its Community Schools Initiative in 2002, about $2 million was made available by the district and several foundations. Each selected school received $130,000: $50,000 for programs, $65,000 for the community partner, and $15,000 for evaluation. Today, the district supports its community schools with a diverse set of funding sources totaling approximately $16 million for the most recent year, 2007. These sources include federal grants, private foundation funds, public funds, and corporate gifts.

Evaluation

Now in its sixth year of implementation, the Community Schools Initiative is demonstrating the power of community schooling to bring about positive changes for students, families, schools, and communities. A number of indicators have improved, including grades, test scores, quality of homework, class participation, class behavior, and parent participation. According to one report, 81 percent of community schools are showing improvement in academic achievement, compared with 74 percent of regular schools (Blank & Berg, 2006).

The University of Chicago conducted a three-year evaluation of the Community Schools Initiative that documented best practices, examined patterns of participation, and evaluated outcomes for students and families (Whalen, 2007). All of the school buildings in the study are open until at least 5:00 p.m., about 43 percent are open until 7:00 p.m., more than half open

several hours before school, and half provide programs on Saturdays. Almost two-thirds offer summer programming. More than 400 external partner organizations are involved in providing assistance with health and social services, youth development, arts and culture, recreation, and business. Several of these organizations are the lead partner agency in five or more school sites.

The report found that "students are receiving a balanced exposure to academic supports such as tutoring; academic enrichment in math, science, and literature; arts and cultural experiences; and recreational opportunities" (Whalen, 2007, p. 2). It concluded that the community school process is improving achievement levels, the quality of instruction, and the climate for learning, and that these effects are strongest among community schools that have been in operation the longest.

Lessons Learned

Chicago is well along on the road toward its ultimate goal—transforming all 600-plus public schools in the district into community schools with working partnerships. Of course, Chicago enjoys some unique advantages. The superintendent is unusually committed to the concept of community schools and is articulate and determined in the pursuit of this goal. In addition, Chicago benefited from the groundwork laid by major funders who had supported community schools in the city even before the Community Schools Initiative, creating models and evaluations that could be replicated.

But Chicago's experience also offers lessons that apply to other districts. It demonstrates what can happen in a large district when everyone gets on board and sticks with the goal. The mayor's office, major universities, foundations, community organizations—all have responded to the concept and joined forces within the schools.

Another significant lesson is the importance of the school principal in implementing a community school. Chicago principals receive ample orientation and learn how to bring much-needed services into their schools. Success in implementing the complex community-school model depends on relationships, starting with the principal's ability to communicate with partner agencies and negotiate policies—for example, who will take responsibility for keeping the school building open for extended hours?

The principal can also take the lead in integrating after-school enrichment with classroom activities. This essential integration requires that teachers and after-school providers spend time together linking after-school activities to the in-school curriculum. Because improved achievement is the goal, all the support services must be shaped to remove barriers to learning.

In some community schools, the services provided by existing school personnel (such as nurses and social workers) have not been coordinated with those provided by outside service agencies (for example, a clinic brought in by a community health center). Lack of coordination can create *silos*—support-service units that are not connected with one another or with the school's personnel. The school principal can help avoid this problem through careful planning at the start and continuous communication throughout the effort. He or she should also ensure that working teams include both school personnel and outside-agency personnel.

It would help the community-school movement if education schools would pay attention to the importance of collaboration, teaching school administrators how to work with community agencies. At the same time, social-work schools should make sure that social workers have the requisite skills to relate to educators.

Although research has documented various benefits of community schools, it has also found that student test scores are slow to improve. First, the school has to be transformed into an effective learning community, which requires at least several years of hard work on the part of teachers, administrators, service partners, and the broader community. The transformation process is labor intensive; it requires open communication, endless meetings, and a lot of patience. And even with all the extra supports provided by community schools, experience has shown that the quality of instructional leadership and professional development is still the key determinant of student academic achievement.

Hope for the Future

Our education system is not equipped to take on the responsibility for solving all our societal problems. Unless we change our approach, the achievement gap will continue to grow and poor children will fall further and further behind. That is why the concept of community schools needs to gain greater visibility among parents, school boards, school administrators, city administrators, major professional organizations, and schools of education and social work.

At the federal level, the outlook is positive. Much of the discussion around the renewal of No Child Left Behind indicates that future efforts will include parts of the community-schools framework. Senator Ben Nelson and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer have introduced the Full-Service Community Schools Act, which calls for $200 million in new funding for community schools (Nelson, 2007). While citizens await action on that act, the Appropriations Committee has directed that $5 million be used for establishing full-service community schools. These funds will be allocated on a competitive basis to consortiums of local education agencies and community-based organizations. (See http://communityschools.org for further information on appropriations.)

Community schools offer hope. They bring together in one place an array of helping hands. They integrate social and health supports with educational enrichment. They teach low-income parents how to help their children do better in school and connect families to the resources they need, such as welfare, help with income taxes and citizenship processes, and even assistance in creating small businesses. In this process, the school becomes a hub, improving the safety and stability of the neighborhood. Those concerned with the improvement of education outcomes and the reduction of poverty would do well to take an interest in community schools.

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Author's note: Adeline Ray, Community Schools Initiative, Office of Extended Learning Opportunities, Chicago Public Schools, provided information about community schools in Chicago for this article.

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