

Research Brief

Community Schools: A Strategy, Not a Program

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When U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appeared on the nationally televised Charlie Rose Show in mid-March, he outlined a bold new vision for America's public schools. "I think our schools should be open 12, 13, 14 hours a day...It's not just lengthening the school day, but offering a wide variety of after-school activities: drama, arts, sports, chess, debate, academic enrichment, programs for parents, GED, ESL, family literacy nights, potluck dinners," said Duncan, going on to explain that, during the seven years he was superintendent of schools in Chicago, "we attached health care clinics to about a dozen of our schools. Where schools become centers of the community, great things happen. So I think we need the schools open much longer hours and, by the way, we don't have to do this all ourselves as educators. We can bring in great non-profits—the YMCAs, the Boys and Girls Clubs, mentoring and tutoring groups to co-locate their services and bolster the community from the school."

More recently, during a March 25 interview published in *Education Daily*, Duncan responded to the question, "What education reforms do you want to see during your administration?" by saying, "It's really trying to redefine fundamentally what it means to be a school. So I think it means a longer day; I think it means all the values and principles around community schools..."

Now, as our Federal education policy appears to be taking a more holistic and student-centered approach, seems an ideal time to take a look at the strategy known as community schools. This Brief will define what we mean by community schools, examine both the theoretical and empirical research around community schools, and explore the national community schools movement.

What Are Full-Service Community Schools?

School systems throughout the country are experiencing dramatic challenges. Achievement gaps are widespread, the true dropout rates are shocking, and the behavior problems of many children are enough to drive any teacher out of the classroom. The basic premise underlying community schools is that schools, by themselves, cannot address all the needs of today's students. All across the country, teachers and school administrators observe that they "cannot do it alone." Partners are required to help provide the services, opportunities, and supports needed by students and their families.

Full-service community schools are public schools that—

- are open most of the time (before and after school, evenings, vacations, summers);
- operate jointly through a partnership between the school and a lead community agency or agencies;
- provide access to health, dental, and mental health services on site through the lead agency or other service providers;
- include space for a primary health clinic and family resource center;
- provide opportunities for parents to be involved in the school;
- integrate school curriculum with after-school and summer enrichment programs;
- offer social and educational services for families and community members; and
- build social capital within the neighborhood.

No two community schools are alike—which is why community school practitioners and advocates talk about “a strategy, not a program.” Of course, there are common programmatic elements, as outlined above, but the vision and planning that initiate the process of transforming traditional schools into community schools must take into consideration 1) the needs of the children and the families in the neighborhood, 2) the current configuration of services provided at the school, 3) the availability and capabilities of local provider agencies, and 4) the willingness of school personnel to change their practice.

Why Are Community Schools Needed?

The community schools strategy rests on a strong theoretical base of multi-disciplinary research, which includes the following strands—

- A very solid body of research demonstrates that children do better in school if they have access at very early ages to health and mental health services and family supports—as well as to school readiness interventions. For example, a study of Chicago’s Child Parent Centers showed that children who had attended at early ages were more likely to stay in school, graduate, and have lower delinquency rates.¹
- Parents need help not only with parenting skills but also with many other aspects of their lives. Strong parent centers in schools can assist families with many of the obstacles that stand in their way—for example, learning English (ESL), employment, housing, and immigration. When parents are involved in their children’s school experience, everyone benefits.²
- The non-school hours represent a time of great risk as well as great opportunity to promote young people’s learning and health development.³ On the risk side of the equation, research indicates that unsupervised adolescents are vulnerable to getting into trouble with well-documented, high-risk behaviors related to sex, drugs, and violence.⁴ For younger children, after-school programs provide safe havens, protecting them from the streets and from going home to empty rooms and ubiquitous TV sets. But good after-school programs have been shown to do more than just keep children off the streets; extended hours build on the school day and offer enrichment tied to

classroom content.⁵ A strong and growing body of research indicates that high-quality programs expand children's horizons, promote the development of social skills, and contribute to emotional adjustment, good work habits, academic achievement, and higher graduation rates.⁶ Children thrive in one-on-one relationships.⁷ Community schools offer close attachments between volunteer and paid mentors and children.⁸

- Another underlying strand of research has to do with building social capital. Drawing on the work of John McKnight, Jody Kretzmann, Robert Putnam, and others, community schools—which are often located in very disadvantaged neighborhoods—seek to build community assets through social networking and joint problem solving. Drug-ridden streets have been cleaned up; cultural events created, open to all; small businesses started; and the mobility rate reduced.⁹ Fragmentation of services makes it difficult for low-income families to access the services they need.¹⁰ When these services are brought into the school and integrated with those provided by the school system, families can use them much more efficiently.

Community Schools in Action

Across the United States, there are many models of community schools, and they share a variety of common features that distinguish them from traditional public schools—most notably extended hours, extended services, and extended relationships (that is, partnerships with community resources). Practitioners representing all of these models work together through a national Coalition for Community Schools, which provides opportunities for information sharing and collective action, including advocacy. The Coalition, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C., has published a variety of research studies and background reports on the community schools strategy.¹¹

The NEA is an active participant in the work of the Coalition—as are many other national education and youth-serving organizations. Several of the best known models of community schools are The Children's Aid Society's Community Schools, Beacon Schools, university-assisted community schools, Bridges to Success, Communities in Schools, Schools of the 21st Century, and Healthy Start. Several cities have taken this strategy to scale, including Chicago (with over 150), Portland (with more than 50), and Baltimore (with more than 40). What follows are highlights of this work across the country, with a focus on research results documented to date.

The Children's Aid Society Community Schools. The Children's Aid Society (CAS) is one of the largest and oldest social welfare agencies in the U.S. In 1992, CAS opened its first community school in a very needy area of New York City, bringing its trained personnel and multiple resources into a school building to create a model “settlement house in a school.”¹² Since then, CAS has created, in partnership with the New York City Department of Education, 20 community schools; and, through its National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools, has worked with hundreds of other schools, community agencies, and school systems nationally and internationally.

In this model, principals, assistant principals, and teachers work with agency staff to create continuity in the academic program through an extended day. All CAS community schools operate after-school programs at least 15 hours per week during the school year, and most offer out-of-school time enrichment programs on school holidays, on Saturdays, and throughout the summer. Day-school teachers help to staff the after-school programs, along with college students, paraprofessionals, youth work-

ers, and community residents. Each after-school program has an Educational Coordinator, a day-school teacher, or staff developer whose job is to coordinate the academic component of the after-school program with the day-school curricula.

Several of CAS's 20 community schools have on-site primary health centers, staffed by medical professionals, including physicians and nurse practitioners. Other CAS community schools have explicit linkages to the CAS Bronx Family Center, which offers a complete array of medical, dental, and mental health services. Health education in the middle schools is offered through weekly sessions on a wide range of issues related to adolescent development. Both school and social agency counselors are on hand to deal with personal issues, school behaviors, and mental health. The physical facility is an essential piece of the CAS model. In three of the sites, new buildings were designed to be community schools. They have large, well-equipped spaces for primary health and dental services, family resource centers, and after-school activities. Two of these new schools have dedicated space for early childhood programs, including Early Head Start and Head Start. At all of these new schools, the playground space is lighted so it can be used in the evening by the neighborhood. In all of the sites, the building is open for extended hours (afternoons, evenings, weekends, summers) and readily accessible for parents, children, and other neighborhood uses.

Since the inception of its community schools work in 1992, CAS has taken seriously the issue of evaluation and has commissioned a variety of external evaluations that have demonstrated impressive results. The most extensive evaluation was conducted over a six-year period, from 1993 through 1999. This evaluation was conducted by a collaborative team from Fordham University's schools of Education and Social Services. The first three years addressed formative issues while the second three focused on outcomes. Results included: improved academic achievement; improved student and teacher attendance; better student-teacher relationships; improved school climate; and dramatic increases in parent involvement. One of the study's key findings was generated during interviews and focus groups with teachers, who consistently reported that the presence of other caring, competent professionals in their buildings enabled them to teach. According to the evaluation team, "Perhaps the most consistent comment from respondents was that the wealth of services and programs provided by CAS freed teachers up to do what they were hired to do—teach the children."¹³

University-Assisted Community Schools. Many universities are involved in programs in schools, largely through teacher training, curriculum development, and evaluation. The University of Pennsylvania went a large step further with the formation of the Center for Community Partnerships (CCP), an agency dedicated to directing faculty research and student coursework toward solving pressing social problems in the university's backyard.¹⁴ The Center began its work in one school in 1985 with an after-school neighborhood clean-up effort, and now includes the development of community school programs in 13 sites within the university area, schools that are open before and after-school, many of them all year long.

The University includes in its own curriculum more than 150 academic offerings, defined as Community Service Courses. University faculty develop curricula in conjunction with the public school teachers, and university students help teach the courses in the schools and work with students as mentors and tutors. In some of these partnership schools, health is the organizing theme. The curriculum is built around health issues and the students are assigned to work in local health agencies. After-school offerings include Health Awareness, Landscaping and Beautification, Health Careers Exposure, Homework Center, Peer Mediation Program, and computer work, among many other subjects. Saturday Community School and evening programs provide students and their families with free educational, recreational, and cultural events. Some of the schools include a social work office and medical and dental screening.

As a result of CCP's efforts, university faculty and students work with principals and teachers to transform the school buildings into community centers. Arts projects produce attractive murals and

decorated hallways while theatrical events tracing local history are performed for the whole community. Cement playgrounds are dug up and replaced with gardens, which produce vegetables to be sold in the school store. For example, the Sayre Health Promotion Disease Prevention Program is a comprehensive, multi-component school day, after-school and evening program that integrates the activities of the health promotion center with educational programs and curricula. University faculty and students in nursing, social work, medicine, dentistry, arts and sciences, education, and law are all involved. A community health advisory council includes all the participants including parents. The Sayre Fruit and Vegetable Stand is a collaboration between Sayre High school and the Urban Nutrition Initiative. Together they have designed an in-school curriculum related to the operation of an after-school fruit and vegetable stand. Each classroom has a theme relating to health and nutrition, math/business development, local ecology/environment, and marketing/publicity. Finally, a “federally qualified” primary health center is being located in Sayre, making it possible not only to provide direct health services to students but also to their families and the whole community. This operation will be integrated into professional education in medicine, nursing, and social work as well as the education of Sayre High School students.

Beacon Schools. The Beacon model, pioneered in New York City through the Department of Youth and Community Development, picks up where the school system leaves off. Community-based agencies receive grants from the city to go into school buildings to light them up and open them to the neighborhood from early in the morning until late in the evening, every day, all year. The Youth Development Institute provides technical assistance to at least 80 sites in New York and seven replication cities (Denver, Minneapolis, Oakland, Palm Beach County, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Savannah).¹⁵

Beacon schools show great variation, one from another, depending on what the school needs most. Many focus on after-school youth development activities and family and cultural events. Some bring in health centers, drug prevention, entrepreneurial programs, and community enterprises. Others feature tutoring and literacy and parent education. Strengthening families by providing support, services, encouragement, and options is a central theme of Countee Cullen Community Center at P.S. 94, which utilizes a number of strategies to involve parents, grandparents, and caregivers. The director of Countee Cullen described the program: “We work to take away apprehension about school. We bring parents into the school, make it user friendly and less threatening...Once we get them into the school, then we talk to them about discussing their child’s performance with a teacher or speaking with the principal.” Through the Parents Initiative, Beacon school staff work together to recruit parents for the school’s Parent Association. Countee Cullen counseling staff members also serve on the school’s Pupil Personnel Committee where they work with school guidance personnel to develop individual treatment plans for troubled families. The result of the Beacon’s collaborative work is that, “The school has become a place to go to resolve issues rather than just collect somebody who got into trouble.”¹⁶

The examples cited here all rely on partnerships between schools and community resources. Increasingly, schools in all corners of the country report formal and informal relationships with outside agencies. These and several other national leaders recently wrote up their models and findings in a special issue of *New Directions for Youth Development*.¹⁷

Conclusion

A substantial body of knowledge from both practice and experience is now available to move the community schools strategy from pilot to policy. A new publication from the Coalition for Community Schools, entitled *Community Schools Research Report '09*, synthesizes current outcome data from initiatives across the country, highlighting a wide array of positive outcomes including academic achievement, improved attendance, reduced dropout rates, improved behavior, positive youth development, greater parent involvement, and benefits to communities.¹⁸

Notes

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 15. See http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/beacon_program.shtml. Retrieved 4/6/09.
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About Jane Quinn

Jane Quinn is a social worker and youth worker with nearly four decades of experience, including direct service with children and families, program development, fundraising, grantmaking, research, and advocacy. She currently serves as the Assistant Executive Director for Community Schools at The Children's Aid Society (CAS) in New York City, where she directs the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools and contributes strategic planning and sustainability expertise to The Children's Aid Society's local community schools initiative in New York City. Jane came to CAS from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, where she served as Program Director for seven years. Prior to that, she directed a national study of community-based youth organizations for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which resulted in the publication of a book entitled *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*. Together with Joy Dryfoos, Jane co-edited a book entitled *Community Schools in Action: Lessons from a Decade of Practice*, which was published by Oxford University Press in 2005. In addition, she writes a regular column on youth development practice issues for *Youth Today*.

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