

Pennsylvania Community Schools: Catch the Vision



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Introduction

True community schools—those that serve as hubs for expanded opportunities and services and are built on partnerships focused on improving outcomes for children and their families—operate quite differently from traditional schools. Not only do many stay open for extended hours, but they also have a welcoming, team-oriented environment.

Community schools pull together the resources of the school and community to enhance children's lives, remove the barriers that keep students from being academically successful and engage parents to support their children's school performance. Community schools adopt the view that a strong instructional environment—combined with engaging enrichment programs and opportunities to access health and social services to improve student learning—builds stronger families and neighborhoods.

Educators in traditional schools and community leaders need to see the community school model in action so they can visualize what it would look like in their district. Straight-forward discussions with those who have transformed their schools into sites offering multiple opportunities for students and families are also necessary. Leaders who are making it work can answer important questions about why creating community schools is a strategy for keeping students engaged in school and overcoming social, health or academic challenges.

The Pennsylvania Community Schools Summit held June 10, 2009 in the state's Lehigh Valley, provided an opportunity for this kind of discussion and action planning. Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Center for Schools and Communities in Pennsylvania, and the Washington-based Coalition for Community Schools, the one-day event drew representatives from United Ways, school districts, non-profit groups, youth development organizations and others.

Addressing the participants, Pennsylvania Education Secretary Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak talked about his goals for ensuring that “children are in cultures that are socially and emotionally well from day one.”

“It takes everyone in a community. Every shoulder is necessary and it begins, we think, with great leadership,” he said.

“Leadership rests not just with a school superintendent or a school principal. A community school is a place in which the responsibility for helping children reach their potential is shared. Leadership at every level is important,” Zahorchak added.

The involvement of Pennsylvania’s Department of Education in the community schools initiative began in 2003 as part of Gov. Edward G. Rendell’s education agenda, explained Mary Ramirez, the director of Community and Student Services for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. “Community schools are a true strategy for success,” she said at the event.

The day’s sessions focused on the work of The United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, located in the northeastern corner of Pennsylvania. With reducing the high school dropout rate as one of its primary goals, the United Way has embraced community schools as a way to accomplish that goal.

“It’s really important to us as an organization and as a community that our kids succeed in school,” said Susan Gilmore, the president of The United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley.

The community schools concept is strongly supported by U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who oversaw the creation of 150 community schools throughout Chicago while he served as the city’s school superintendent. That commitment is demonstrated by the inclusion of community schools as an authorized use of Title I funds in new federal guidelines regarding the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). For example, Title I ARRA funds can be used to hire a community school coordinator, coordinate health, social

and nutrition services, provide professional development on meeting students’ comprehensive needs or pay teachers to offer after-school learning opportunities.

Interviewed recently by television journalist Charlie Rose, Secretary Duncan reiterated his belief in why schools should be “the centers of community.”

“When a school becomes a center of community life, great things are going to happen to those families and great things are going to happen for those children,” Duncan said, listing drama, sports, art, debate, health clinics, GED classes and programs for parents as some of the activities that partnerships with other organizations can bring to life within the school building.

“Those buildings don’t belong to you or me. They don’t belong to the unions, they belong to the community. We have these great physical resources and we need to maximize them,” Duncan added.

In recent decades, educators have worked to strengthen the aspects of schooling that are part of their domain—the quality of teaching and leadership, curriculum and accountability systems. Research by David C. Berliner, an education professor at Arizona State University, points to out-of-school factors that also play a large part in how successful children are in school: low birth weight, poor health care, hunger and family stress can seriously hinder a child’s learning experience.

As Dr. Zahorchak and Secretary Duncan suggest, multiple partners are needed to achieve this vision.

“We make the incorrect assumption that our schools can do all of this on their own,” says Martin Blank, the director of the Coalition for Community Schools and the president of the Institute for Educational Leadership. The expertise lies in our neighborhoods, lies in our families, lies in our community-based organizations, our institutes of higher education. The question is, can we bring that into alignment?” ●

Community Schools in the Lehigh Valley

The Pennsylvania Lehigh Valley is made up of urban and rural areas between Philadelphia and New York City. The superintendents of three school districts in the Lehigh Valley—Allentown, with 18,000 students, the Bethlehem Area school district with approximately 15,000 students and the 3,600-student Bangor Area school district—have bought into Secretary Duncan’s vision and are implementing the same types of programs in their districts.

Working with 11 schools in three school districts, the United Way’s Community Partners for Student Success (COMPASS) initiative has brought together a diverse mix of organizations that have dedicated themselves to the mission of using schools as places to address the critical needs of students and their families. COMPASS began in 2005 and currently involves 11 of the 42 schools in the Lehigh Valley that have been identified as having the highest need in terms of poverty and academic performance.

The five lead partners involved in the effort are the Boys and Girls Clubs of Allentown; Communities in Schools of the Lehigh Valley; Northampton Community College; the Center for Humanistic Change and the Slater Family Network, a family center that offers afterschool programs, adult education, food and clothing assistance and other services. These lead partners employ and supervise Community School Directors, bring their own expertise and services to the site and leverage additional resources through other partnerships.

During one session at the Summit, superintendents of the three districts spoke about their commitment to the community schools approach.

“I believe that the community school effort can link us into successfully developing assets within our kids,” said John Reinhart, superintendent of the Bangor Area school system, a rural community with a district-wide community schools effort that is part of COMPASS.

Because his district is not wealthy, in terms of funding or large corporations, he has looked to community schools as a cost-effective way to bring additional services and programs into the school building.

“Our schools can’t offer all things to all people. We have to look to the community,” Reinhart said. “I think community schools can offer real leveraging power...it’s a better way to handle the issues we face.”

Dr. Karen S. Angello, the superintendent of the Allentown School District, believes community schools match the needs of students with the resources available in the community. “We have benevolence in the Lehigh Valley; benevolence of heart, benevolence of skills, benevolence of funding,” she said. “So why are we doing this? Because we have the ingredients. Community schools are all about aligning resources...to benefit our children and their families.”

Two elementary schools and one middle school in Allentown are part of the COMPASS project. In the Bethlehem Area district, three elementary schools are involved in COMPASS and a middle school is expected to become part of the initiative soon.

Dr. Joseph A. Lewis, Bethlehem’s superintendent, used a story to illustrate how the bridges built between partners involved in community schools can have a meaningful effect. An elementary school parent required a translator for teacher conferences and because of the school’s partnership with Northampton Community College, the mother was given access to English as a Second Language classes and is now far more capable of communicating with her child’s teachers.

“That’s a simple success story, but that connection doesn’t take place unless a coordinator recognizes a need, unless a college is willing to provide a service,” Lewis said. ●

The Role of the United Way

The community schools initiative in the Lehigh Valley would not be as successful without the involvement of the United Way and its long-range goal of reducing the dropout rate by half. The organization worked to bring together the right partners to realize that goal.

“We’re really good at being part of a community table and a community conversation,” Gilmore said. “We’re looking at outcomes and we’re constantly seeking the very best ways to do our work.”

As more United Way organizations across the country move to a “Community Impact” model (linking investments with community goals), many United Ways convene multiple stakeholders such as community leaders, business partners, donors and institutions of higher education around a “community table” to generate solutions to the region’s most

pressing issues such as the high school dropout rate.

Of the more than \$3 million the Lehigh Valley United Way has committed to early childhood programs and other education initiatives, about \$300,000 has been dedicated to the community schools effort. These funds, combined with those provided by the school districts, lead partners and various public and private revenue sources, cover the community school coordinators’ salaries as well as programs at the schools and ongoing support.

“But spending money and matching a community-based organization with a high-need school is just the beginning,” added Marci Ronald, who directs the COMPASS effort for the United Way. “Our role is as the intermediary. We’re providing not just the funding, but also the training and technical support that’s necessary to get it done.” ●

Nuts and Bolts

As Ms. Gilmore mentioned, having outcomes in mind is important for any endeavor. Identifying outcomes is the first topic that Ms. Ronald includes as part of a “nuts and bolts” framework for developing community schools.

-Identifying the right outcomes. Partners should involve the district, parents and school leaders in examining data and determining their goals for students, families and the neighborhood. Goals should be integrated with the school’s strategic plan. Expanded learning opportunities should build on the goals of the curriculum. The school and its community partners should also agree on how results will be measured.

-Building the right knowledge base. Take a look at the existing assets and resources within the community. Learn from other community schools and experts by going

on site visits and participating in conferences and webinars. Community agencies should become familiar with the “language” and priorities of education, while educators should work to understand what community-based organizations can offer and how they operate.

-Identifying the right structure. Partners need to decide the elements that will work best for their community, but key aspects of community schools include extended hours and expanded services. Clear roles and expectations need to be articulated for each partner involved. Formal agreements and contracts covering issues such as access to student data and facility-use should be signed. Leaders need to decide on the skills they are looking for in a community school coordinator. Qualities might include having education experience, being a good communicator or being bilingual. *(continued on page 6)*

-Building the right energy and support. Keys to sustaining a community school effort include having “transparent relationships” with all of the partners involved and knowing specifically how the money raised should be spent. Leaders should also develop compelling messages about how community schools are truly improving students’ lives to share with a variety of constituent groups. Finally, leaders should offer plenty of opportunities for people to stay involved in the work of the community school.

-Knowing what you want to buy and how you're going to pay for it. Financing community schools is challenging, but clearly prioritizing which element is the most important (for COMPASS the focus is on coordination) and making a strong

case for that piece of the work can help. COMPASS’ lead investor is the United Way, but the partnership has long received support from the Department of Human Services from two counties, corporate foundations and business partners and grants. Many schools creatively utilize Title I funds, state accountability block grants and Safe Schools/Healthy Students funds for parent engagement, family support and outreach.

“The essence of what we’re trying to create here is to harness the power of the community, and to put it into a framework that works for schools,” Ronald told the participants. ●

A Community College Partner

The mission of a community school is to bring resources and services into the school building to enrich children’s lives and prepare them to be successful beyond high school. Partnerships should also benefit everyone involved, as Art Scott, president of Northampton Community College explained.

“If we have an educated populace, the quality of life in our region improves, economic development is enhanced, and that’s what we are concerned about,” Scott said. “So, it fits perfectly for us. We also know that we’ll be able to provide better collegiate-level instruction if we understand better the families that we serve.”

He added that when postsecondary institutions become partners in the community school effort, it can “de-mystify the notion of going to college.”

“If our faculty and staff are there with the families and the young students, college is no longer unattainable,” Scott said. “It’s attainable because we talked to them about that right from the start.”

Community colleges are not typical partners of community schools; Scott added that he sees a lot of similarity between the work of community colleges and the goals of community schools. “We talk a lot about blurring the lines between the community and the college,” he said. “So we want our buildings to be open 24-7. We want community groups to use our facilities.”

As part of the COMPASS initiative, Northampton Community College is the lead partner at Fountain Hill Elementary School in the Bethlehem Area district. In this role, the college provides adult education opportunities, hosts events for Fountain Hill families on its campus and helps to coordinate 21st Century Learning Center activities. College students also provide mentoring to students. Recognizing that transportation is a challenge for many families, the college has even used its van to transport parents to teacher conferences.

“They’ve worked out a beautiful relationship,” Ronald says. ●

Community Schools Partnerships in Education

Sayre High School

The University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center for Community Partnerships is the lead partner at Sayre High School, a 650-student, high-poverty school. Seven staff members from the center work at Sayre and have developed a comprehensive approach to preparing students for success after high school.

"We're moving towards this model where learning is at the core, and the connection to learning is at the core of everything we do," said Tyler Holmberg, director of the Sayre-Penn Partnership Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program.

Because of this partnership between the school and the center, Sayre students have access to a wide range of academic and enrichment opportunities. Through the Netter Center's College Access and Career Readiness program, students receive four years of career and college development. Paid internships give them real-world experience in local businesses, in their school, on the Penn campus or within the University Health System. In a summer institute, rising seniors are paired with Penn undergraduates who serve as mentors to the students as they begin their college application process.

The Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative, also a Netter Center program, provides nutrition education, a school garden, access to healthy food and other efforts to improve health outcomes for Sayre students and others in the community. The partnership between the center and the university also led to the establishment of the Sayre Health Center, which opened in 2007. Students and members of the community can receive both clinical and health education services. Students interested in the health field also get the chance to work with Penn doctors.

For the university, the work at Sayre has involved "academically-based community service" courses for hundreds of college students and faculty members. College students and professors perform community service at Sayre while also conducting research and practicing in their field.

This intense focus on preparing high school students for college, combined with giving students responsibility and encouraging healthier lifestyles has resulted in measurable success for the school. In 2007, Sayre was one of only five neighborhood high schools in Philadelphia to make Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act. Ninety percent of the school's first senior class graduated in 2007 and over half enrolled in postsecondary education. More than \$50,000 in college scholarships was secured.

South Mountain Middle School

In January 2008, South Mountain Middle School in Allentown became the first urban middle school to become part of the COMPASS community schools initiative. With Communities in Schools of the Lehigh Valley as the school's lead partner, the school has seen "an explosion of parent involvement," Ronald said. An extensive list of innovative afterschool programs has been added, including hip hop dance, hand drumming, theater arts, a science center and a gardening club project.

Once a year, a "Family Fun Night" is held, reinforcing the message that parents should be involved. In this large middle school of about 1,200 students, over 300 families participated in this new annual tradition. The school also houses a special education center, which gives students with disabilities access to afterschool classes and other enrichment programs. In addition, the school has started a "Bring-Your-Parent-to-School Day" to keep parents plugged in to what their middle school children are learning.

"We've had to put a lot of emphasis on after-school tutoring, but we know that can't be the only thing," Angello said.

Calypso Elementary School

A small, 300-student neighborhood school in Bethlehem, Calypso already has a close-knit environment. But with Communities In Schools of the Lehigh Valley as its lead community school partner, that feeling is being enhanced. *(continued on page 8)*

For example, grade level potluck dinners are held to bring families together. In connection with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Allentown, the school features a “Make Your MARK” literacy and math program. A wide range of afterschool programs are available and students have been involved in an innovative “mural in the park” project that involves several community organizations. The school also participates in the No Place for Hate campaign, sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League.

Students in need of medical and dental care have access to services through a collaborative program with the St. Luke’s Bethlehem Partnership for Healthy Communities and the school district. In addition, a positive behavior support program at the school has resulted in improved discipline there. ●

Moving Forward in Lancaster

The 11,400-student Lancaster school district is another strong example of a community school initiative in Pennsylvania. In 2005, with a federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, the district implemented a community school model at Washington Elementary and Lincoln Middle School. Each school has had a full-time community school coordinator hired by a lead agency—Pressley Ridge at Washington and the Community Action Program at Lincoln. Some of the initiatives developed during the pilot phase included a health clinic at Washington, a doctor who screens kindergarteners for vision issues, visits by a dental van, mental health services at both schools and evening classes for parents.

A third school, King Elementary, is expected to begin operating as a community school soon as well. In fact, the goal of turning all district schools into community schools has been written into the district’s strategic plan, which extends through 2013.

“Our community is ready to move on this and our district leadership is ready to expand,” said Pamela Smith, the Safe

Schools/Healthy Students coordinator for the district. A coordinator for full-service community schools has already been hired at the district level, and Smith said she is currently in the process of “grooming” community agencies to become future lead partners for schools.

“Attending the June summit was especially helpful for some of those agencies in Lancaster, such as the local Boys and Girls Clubs, because it gave them a chance to hear about the role of community partners from other superintendents around the state,” Smith added.

State Education Secretary Zahorchak’s comments also reinforced that the community school concept is embraced at the state level.

“Initial results from the pilot effort at Washington Elementary in Lancaster shows an increase in test scores, improvements in attendance and genuine parent engagement,” Smith said. “Kids are able to focus on learning.” ●

Leadership is Key

The presenters at the conference unanimously agreed that support from superintendents is an important key to beginning a community schools initiative. “Once they’ve ‘caught the vision,’ it can spread to principals and community partners,” noted Gilmore from the United Way.

Other presenters noted that having a committed principal is also necessary. In fact, George White, the director of the Educational Leadership program at Lehigh University, said principals of community schools are demonstrating a new level of leadership that goes beyond being a good manager and instructional leader.

Effective leaders are those who are learning how “to cement the relationships that exist between the school and other partners,” White said.

The community school coordinator “also plays this role of a ‘relationship manager and effective negotiator’ who can guide different partners in delivering the services and

programs that are the best fit for the students in that school,” Roland added.

Dr. Angello described it as “distributive leadership.”

“Now there are levels of authority,” Angello said about the community schools in her district. “So you might go to an event, and you would see one of those partners taking charge of that event.”

“Teachers, not just school administrators, have a significant role in the success of community school programs,” noted White, who also leads the Center for Developing Urban Educational Leaders. The center is working to train not only principals, but also teachers, community members and parents to be leaders in the schools.

The “heart and soul” of the university’s teacher-leader program, White said, “is keeping good people in the classroom, but also empowering them to lead.” ●

Challenges

As mentioned, the community school model is a departure from the way schools traditionally operate and for many educators, community leaders and parents, this way of thinking doesn’t come naturally.

“It’s about learning how to dance with a school differently,” Ronald said.

Secretary Duncan alluded to this challenge in his comments to Mr. Rose, saying that one factor that works against the community schools concept is “a lack of creativity.”

“Our society has changed and our schools have not kept pace,” Duncan said.

Another significant challenge is overcoming “turf issues,” the speakers said, and creating the high level of trust that is

necessary for the kind of “distributive leadership” that Dr. Angello described.

Successful leaders of community school projects are not the ones who “think they’re going to solve the problems of the school by themselves,” White said. But he added that for principals, sharing leadership doesn’t mean giving up responsibility for what takes place in the building.

“What it means is that they say, ‘I’m smart enough as a leader to know that there are other people in this room who can do this better, and can laser focus on what needs to be done,’” White said. “The best principals that we work with are the people who help identify, codify the problems and then find the right people in the room who can help lead to the solutions.”

(continued on page 10)

Dr. Lewis noted that the best approach to handling situations in which a volunteer or another partner might be feeling left out or not recognized for their work is to have a face-to-face dialogue and to talk about why someone might feel uncomfortable. Through that process, perhaps they can realize the goal is not to receive credit.

The superintendents also noted that, of course, some principals are more reluctant than others to make this change in their schools, in part because of the risks they perceive. "In fairness to principals, having been one, when things go wrong, that's where the buck stops," Lewis said.

That's why leadership at the district level is important, they suggested, because the district can create an expectation that schools move in this direction. They can also point to successful models so other principals can see how bringing health, recreation, tutoring and other programs into the school benefits students. Dr. Lewis commented that in his district, the higher socioeconomic schools perhaps feel "cheated" because they don't receive funding that is specifically targeted for lower-income schools. The principals, however, still share information and ideas, and Dr. Lewis says he tries to find other resources for those schools.

Dr. White added that sometimes convincing principals that community schools can lead to student success also takes "good old grassroots organizing" by having parents and community members advocate for these services.

A 2008-09 report card on the COMPASS initiative shows that community schools are having an effect on student school

experiences. In the Bangor district, for example, the students who participated in a science enrichment program expressed greater knowledge and appreciation for the subject area. At Fountain Hill Elementary in the Bethlehem district, 3rd graders said they would give up recess in order to work with their tutor. In Allentown, among the students at Roosevelt Elementary who regularly attended the school's Make Your Mark Program, 63 percent increased their math scores at least one grade level and 38 percent increased their reading scores at least one grade level.

Among the schools participating in COMPASS, more than 3,000 students participated in before- or afterschool programs, and more than 660 participated in over 40 different summer school programs. On average, almost 60 percent of students participated in afterschool activities. At Central Elementary in Allentown, the Clothing Closet and the Second Harvest Food Bank is open twice a week. Over 800 households were served during the school year. Vision vans also serve children in the Bangor school district and at Roosevelt Elementary; 38 children who needed glasses received them.

Schools also reported increases in positive behavior and a drop in discipline referrals. Parent participation also showed an increase over previous years through parent gatherings, teacher conferences and volunteer opportunities. At Lincoln Elementary in the Bethlehem Area district, for example, 85 percent of parents said during teacher conferences that they wanted to learn more about volunteering and 20 parents attended a two-hour training program. ●

Making it All Come Together

Each day, community schools demonstrate the ideals of lifelong learning and continuous improvement. Not only do they provide programs that encourage students and adults to achieve and grow, but the leaders of these schools are always looking for ways to be even more effective.

Mr. Reinhart of the Bangor Area district says the lessons community schools are learning are applicable "in almost any school setting in almost any school anywhere."

"It's not just about creating stronger schools and student achievement," Reinhart said, summing up the thoughts shared at the event. "It's about building stronger communities, and giving people – people of all ages – the opportunities to find within them the talents, the interest that will help make all of their lives better and all of our communities stronger." ●

Author/Acknowledgements

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Center for Schools and Communities

The Center for Schools and Communities focuses on prevention and intervention initiatives operated by schools, organizations and agencies serving children, youth and families. For more information, please visit www.center-school.org.

Coalition for Community Schools

The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in education K-16, 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. The Coalition advocates for community schools as the vehicle for strengthening schools, families and communities so that together they can improve student learning.

Please visit www.communityschools.org for more information on community schools in the Lehigh Valley. Click on About Community Schools, choose Local Initiatives and scroll down to Lehigh Valley, PA. The following PowerPoint presentations are among the additional resources listed.

Community Schools: An Important Strategy to Support Student Success, Marty Blank, Coalition for Community Schools

Community Partners for Student Success

The United Way launched Community Partners for Student Success (COMPASS) as an ambitious two-county collaborative with a vision to identify, strengthen and promote community-connected schools so that all Lehigh Valley students succeed and graduate from high school ready to lead meaningful and productive lives. For more information, please visit www.unitedwayglv.org/COMPASS.php

Pennsylvania Department of Education

The mission of the Pennsylvania Department of Education is to lead and serve the educational community to enable each individual to grow into an inspired, productive, fulfilled lifelong learner. For more information, please visit www.education.state.pa.us.

United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley

The United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley funds 89 programs at 54 human service agencies throughout the Lehigh Valley, as well as four community building partnerships. In addition, the organization is pursuing a strategic direction that proactively addresses key community goals designed to improve the regional community's quality of life. For more information, please visit www.unitedwayglv.org.

Nuts & Bolts of Community Schools Marci Ronald, United Way of Lehigh Valley

For more information on Title I and Community Schools Go to: www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/guidance/titlei-reform.pdf

2010
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