

A Conversation with Superintendents:

Teresa Weatherall Neal, Grand Rapids, Michigan & Steven Webb, Vancouver, Washington

This month, Coalition for Community Schools Director, Marty Blank spoke to the new co-chairs of the Superintendents Leadership Council, Teresa Weatherall Neal and Steve Webb, about their role as superintendents in districts with community schools. They both shared how they've used their expertise and experience to continue the work of partnering for student success.



Teresa Weatherall Neal,
Superintendent, Grand Rapids City
School District



Dr. Steven Webb, Superintendent,
Vancouver Public Schools

Marty: Tell us about the challenges you've faced in your districts that led you to the Community Schools strategy.

Steve: Three pressing challenges led to us adopting the Community Schools model in Vancouver Public Schools. First, the Great Recession affected many Vancouver families. Over the past decade, students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals increased from 37% to a peak of 57%, and last school year we served 830 homeless students. Second, like other districts we've seen the urbanization of what was once a suburban school district. Lower income families are being pushed from the city to suburban Vancouver. Third, NCLB accountability measures labeled our schools with high poverty and large English language learner populations as persistently low achieving schools. In response, we formed an "Opportunity Zone" built on the community schools strategy and redirected resources to schools with the highest needs.

Teresa: The face of Grand Rapids has changed. We have more children in poverty and more children for whom English is their second language. So we really needed to utilize a strategy to bring the community together in a way that could mitigate the new challenges we were all facing. The school district alone was not able to deal with the myriad of issues and challenges that were upon us in Grand Rapids Public Schools. We needed to bring something new to the city that leveraged the assets and resources of the community, and that strategy was community schools.

Marty: What drew you to the Community Schools strategy?

Teresa: When I was an Assistant Superintendent in Grand Rapids, I found myself bartering with people to serve kids. If I had a kid with health issues, I'd go to the health community and say "can you partner with me to deal with this issue," or the social services community, or the courts. I'd represent my students based on my relationship with the community. I served as a resource provider without the official title. I was looking for a way to formalize the approach of working in partnerships with community organizations to serve my students, and this is how we came to the Community Schools approach. The strategy connected me to like-minded people who helped me make what was bartering into a more intentional approach, with a broader sphere of influence. We've now created The Kent County Social Services Network to support children. We also have a program called "The Wheel" that attaches children who are struggling or under resourced to an individual or service that can help them. This wheel of supports now stops students from falling through the cracks. We are more about prevention and intervention than we were in the past.

Steve: The community schools strategy provided a flexible district and community-based approach to addressing learning and socio-economic issues in several poverty-impacted schools. Our implementation of the Opportunity Zone initiative is a "whole-system" community schools approach for improving student achievement in 16 schools serving our highest-needs neighborhoods. Through partnerships, we mobilized community resources in support of children and families. Our Family-Community Resource Centers (FCRC) were expanded to all 16 of the Opportunity Zone schools. FCRC coordinators at each site are school employees who work with partners to provide basic needs assistance, parent activities, early childhood education, out-of-school time programs, connections to community-based services, and outreach to chronically absent students.

Our current partners include businesses, faith-based groups, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood associations, and public agencies. For example, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southwest Washington offers out-of-school time programs. Vancouver Housing Authority gives vouchers to parents who commit to being involved in their children's education. The Council for the Homeless finds housing for displaced families. The Foundation for Vancouver Public Schools provides financial support for meeting basic needs. This investment in our students and community is removing barriers and improving student achievement, and we know the impact that commitment and collaboration can have on educators, the families we serve, and our community.

Marty: Has your leadership style changed as you lead in a community schools context?

Steve: Absolutely. This is about leadership and creating a culture that enables partners to transform outcomes that will lead to post-secondary success. I can create the context and

conditions for people to partner in ways that have not been done before. My leadership is really more about service development and moving people forward in ways that really match our vision.

Teresa: I have always focused my personal leadership on getting to the smallest unit -- our children. I ask, "What does it take to get to yes"? Sometimes that's hard. It takes an open leader. Some of our local partner organizations were not used to the business of community schools – it's messy work. Sometimes organizations look for something very clean to implement. We have to create an opportunity for families to have dignity and responsibility and to move to a yes. It takes time for people to get there. This required me to be a leader who galvanizes the assets of partners and embraces stakeholders that are focused on getting the best results for our kids

Marty: What would you tell your peers about your experience implementing community schools?

Teresa: I would tell them that in order to focus on teaching and learning we need others to help remove barriers for children. Children are in schools a small percentage of the day. The rest of the day many are with organizations in the community. Many times children have better and more powerful relationships with these institutions than we do. A seamless relationship among the institutions that serve children helps.

Steve: I would say the future of public education and quite frankly the future of our country is dependent on this work. We can change student trajectories, and that is shown by the progress made over the past 8 years. Early literacy of students in Vancouver schools is up 21% since implementing community schools. We're partnering so that parents can be the first educator, and we are prepared to provide additional supports so that students come into kindergarten ready to learn on day one. We're closing the achievement gap for second language learners with a 20-point narrowing of the gap in literacy rates since 2008. Our on-time graduation rate for 2015 exceeds 80%; it's up 16 points since 2010. Students in poverty or African American and Hispanic students are leading the way in these improvements. It requires letting go and empowering partners to build capacity in schools and in neighborhoods.

Marty: What are the three biggest lessons you've learned as a school leader implementing community schools, and what advice would you give your peers?

Steve: First, go slow to go fast and make sure to scale in a way that is very deliberate. It's important that the district has the technical and physical capacity to do this work. You also don't want to overwhelm your partners. Second, don't let perfection be the enemy of good. Our Fruit Valley Learning Center was our first community school. Initially, we wanted to replicate that space at our elementary schools. When we started to look at the space requirements we saw the financial challenges. We pivoted quickly, understanding that

space is important. It's really about partnerships in a neighborhood and a school that provides the right resources for our kids. Part of the work of scaling is about conducting an asset and needs inventory to create something unique for each neighborhood.

The third lesson is about building a community vision. You do not want community schools to be your vision or the board's vision, but rather the community's vision. Redirecting \$1.5 million from our northern suburban schools would fill a board room in many communities. When we did this not a single parent showed up to speak against it. You must invest early in building a vision that reflects the values of the community.

Teresa: First, we need people outside the school system to help our children. While it may be at a cost, we need people with this expertise and that doesn't always exist within school walls. And that's okay. Secondly, we have to service the whole child, and it takes time to change institutions that are 100 years old to think and behave in a holistic way. It takes time to change mindsets. Lastly, when it's about building a supportive and healthy climate for our students, it's not about win/lose. There can be a win/win. The community schools model removes barriers so we can be about the business of educating children. And when this happens, teachers, families, and students all win.

In partnership with AASA, the School Superintendents Association, the Coalition for Community Schools formed Community Schools Superintendents Leadership Council in 2011 to serve as a peer support group that spotlights leaders who are deepening their efforts to implement the community school strategy district-wide. In addition we want to demonstrate to the public, policymakers, thought leaders and other superintendents across the country that community schools are a vital and effective education reform strategy.

Are you a Superintendent interested in joining this network? Please contact Maame Appiah, Director, Operations and Network Development at appiahm@iel.org.