THE GROWING CONVERGENCE OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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“That’s what community schools are about—expanded learning opportunities, expanded health opportunities, expanded everything opportunities.”

-Jane Sundius, Open Society Institute-Baltimore

Students in gifted and talented programs often have opportunities for enrichment that are not available to other students. Under the new community school structure at John Eager Howard Elementary School in Baltimore, however, all students may now take advantage of opportunities for enrichment. With the involvement of several community partners, all of Howard’s young “scholars” may learn French and Spanish during two hours of “cultural enrichment” time after school. They may even explore music by trying out the violin or stay physically active through karate and yoga.

“It’s all about exposure and access that they would not have had before,” says Jennifer McDowell, community schools coordinator at Howard and an organizer for Child First Authority, Inc.—the nonprofit organization that is the community school’s lead partner agency. English classes for parents and the development of a neighborhood Girl Scout troop—something that most of the girls in this all-African American, 100 percent poverty-rate school wouldn’t typically participate in—are two other outcomes that have resulted from McDowell’s connections with local partners and her efforts to find out what parents and students want and need.

In addition to McDowell, two part-time staff members help link what happens during the school day to what happens after school. Child First’s program coordinator—a 5th grade teacher at Howard during the school day—makes certain that the afterschool academic and enrichment opportunities build on classroom activities. For example, an afterschool “green keeper” club—which includes activities such as mixing up homemade cleaning products—complements the regular school day’s “green” school activities. An academic coordinator (a 3rd grade teacher at the school) works to match STEM-related afterschool activities with students’ individual learning needs. “Afterschool is the number one strategy we are using to increase student achievement,” says McDowell, who worked as a community organizer for Child First before becoming a coordinator. “Now we have more opportunity to build the right partners that our schools need.”

**Merging Community School and Afterschool Strategies**

Howard Elementary is part of a new effort in Baltimore to merge the work of afterschool providers with the community schools strategy. Some, but not all, Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) locations have enthusiastically adopted the community schools strategy. Until last year, the Family League of Baltimore, a nonprofit organization that funds programs aimed at reducing poverty in Baltimore and improving families’ health and well-being, operated two separate funding processes—one for local agencies involved in community schools and another for afterschool providers. Under its new approach, however, the Family League requires organizations requesting funds to demonstrate their commitment to community schools and then provide assurances that out-of-school-time programs represent a major component of their work. The Family League’s change in approach reflects the belief that a more integrated approach to academics, enrichment, health and social support, and family engagement will improve student success and contribute to stronger communities. Accordingly, organizations such as Child First
Authority, which had already been delivering afterschool programs throughout the district and was part of a well-established out-of-school-time sector, are now taking on new roles as lead agencies—or coordinating partners—in community schools.

Currently, BCPS accounts for 38 community schools—also called community resource schools—serving over 17,000 students and families, according to the Family League. Another 48 out-of-school-time programs deliver programming to over 3,700 students at those schools.

Previously, “Community schools were pigeonholed as a program,” says Michael Sarbanes, who is executive director of BCPS’s Office of Engagement but has a background in community advocacy work around issues such as housing and improving safety. Likewise, in many schools, afterschool programs were just something that took place “down the hall.” Now, Sarbanes says, there is “an overwhelming sense that schools should be open, should be connected to networks [of programs and services], and should provide value to the community.”

With Andrés A. Alonso recently retiring after six years as BCPS’s chief executive officer, responsibility will fall to interim superintendent Tisha Edwards and Alonso’s successor to maintain the commitment to the community schools vision. However, Sarbanes added that the school board also includes “strong community school advocates.”

The community school approach is also a central component of the district’s plans to remodel and rebuild many of its dilapidated schools. With the $1.2 billion the district is receiving from the state for construction and renovation of schools over the next 10 years, leaders are considering how to create stronger “relationships with the community” in the design of the buildings, Sarbanes says.

To Ellie Mitchell, director of the Maryland Out-of-School-Time (MOST) Network, plans for remodeling and rebuilding schools translate into, for example, the opportunity to design storage space for materials and supplies belonging to community partners and to create spaces that are open to the community—such as libraries and health clinics—as long as the associated activities do not interrupt student learning or present a safety problem. “What a huge opportunity,” she says.

Jane Sundius, director of the Education and Youth Development Program at the Open Society Institute-Baltimore and a member of the Family League’s community and school engagement strategy steering committee, says that the marriage between community schools and out-of-school-time providers has enhanced the work of community schools, making them stronger than the city’s earlier versions of community schools. For example, Sundius notes that the staff members of afterschool programs often have more regular contact with children and families than do teachers and therefore are able to determine what health, behavior, or other issues might need attention from the community school coordinator or other partners.

**Extending the School Day**

Finally, Baltimore is one of three cities involved in the ExpandED Schools Network, funded in part by The After-School Corporation. As part of a larger movement to extend the school day by re-imagining it, ExpandED schools create modified school schedules that extend the school day. Opportunities run from breakfast through dinner and build in additional time for science, the arts, and other enrichment activities provided by community partners. ExpandED offers another
opportunity to combine a model of expanded learning with the comprehensive and collaborative approach of community schools.

**Structure and Governance**

Baltimore’s community schools and efforts to expand learning receive funding from a variety of sources through the Family League, including the mayor’s office, the Governor’s Office for Children, and organizations such as the Open Society Institute, which also funded the Safe and Sound Campaign afterschool initiative. The school district also contributes to the Family League. BCPS is using a four-year grant from The Wallace Foundation to improve the quality of expanded learning programs through professional development and the use of data. The Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) provides support for STEM-related afterschool and summer programs.

The steering committee, which brings together lead community school partners, out-of-school-time providers, funders, and school district personnel, has been in place for about a year. It is essential, Sundius says, for overseeing and guiding all of the Family League’s work, but also to “spread the word” about the connections between community schools and expanded learning. “That’s what community schools are about—expanded learning opportunities, expanded health opportunities, expanded everything opportunities,” she says.

A separate committee focuses specifically on STEM learning. In addition, “mini networks”—similar to professional learning communities for out-of-school-time providers—have developed around specific issues such as expanded learning opportunities for middle and high school students, the use of data, and the support of students with special needs.

As compared to previous community school initiatives’ steering committees, the recently formed steering committee seems, in Sundius’s opinion, to have fostered a new climate as it focuses on out-of-school time. In the past, she said, committee members spent considerable time discussing “what community schools are supposed to be.” Given the committee’s large membership, however, she believes that it might be prudent at some point to create an executive committee.

It makes sense, she adds, that both community school partners and expanded learning program providers are tracking attendance as a key indicator of their effectiveness. Chronic absenteeism—whether during the regular school day or in afterschool programs—is a window into a variety of other problems, such as illness, poor behavior, or a family crisis. “Attendance is a way to fix many of the issues that kids have,” she says.

**Expanding Learning and Engaging Parents**

At the local level, community school coordinators meet quarterly with providers to talk about needs in their schools and how to reach students who are not currently enrolled in any type of expanded learning activity. At Howard Elementary, principal Tamara Hanson and McDowell think about how to expand learning opportunities for students who cannot or do not attend the afterschool program. Every Friday for the last hour of the school day, Howard Elementary offers enrichment activities, such as those provided afterschool, permitting students to try out a new talent or skill every six weeks. Local partners, such as a neighboring synagogue, help organize student lunch clubs that focus on a variety of interests, such as knitting, newspaper writing, and chess. “It’s an informal time where adults from the community can share what they know and love with the kids,” McDowell says.
The community school initiative at Howard Elementary is also creating a vehicle for parents to express and address their concerns. At parent meetings, for example, McDowell heard comments that, when the parents picked up their children after work, it was already dark outside, with no lights shining on the school field. In response, McDowell mobilized a team of parents for an evening mission to see if there were lights that could be turned on. Wearing safety vests and equipped with flashlights, they discovered that, in fact, there were field lights but that they had been turned off because there were no afterschool programs in the past. Within a week, the parents figured out who was responsible for setting the timer on the lights; the field was illuminated.

Action to address a relatively simple issue, McDowell says, has helped teach parents that their opinion matters and that they have an important responsibility to be part of the school. When McDowell started her new position, parents were not volunteering any time; now, they give more than 500 hours a month. McDowell also co-chairs the school’s family engagement committee and has situated her desk in the school’s front office, reinforcing the message that Howard Elementary’s status as community school is “infused into who we are,” she says. Ultimately, McDowell would like the community school to establish a governing committee, but building the connections with parents and partners, she says, is a step in that direction. “This work is relational. It’s not coming in and saving the school. We really want to be a true partner,” McDowell says. “It doesn’t serve the community if we just bring in a bunch of programs.”

**Learning during the Summer**

Given that community school coordinators work year-round, they are involved in organizing summer learning opportunities. A Read to Succeed program for rising kindergarten through grade 3 students is available at 18 sites—8 of which are community schools—for children needing extra reading support. In those 8 schools, the coordinator is on hand to address any other barriers that might keep students from succeeding, says Julia Baez, senior director of education initiatives at the Family League.

At Howard Elementary, which is not one of the 18 summer sites, McDowell uses her knowledge of what students enjoy during the enrichment times and lunch clubs to direct them into a variety of community-based camp opportunities available during the summer. Many of the out-of-school-time providers who partner with the community schools during the year also operate summer programs, and the relationships that have developed among coordinators, providers, and families help ensure that students are guided into meaningful summer opportunities.

**Facing New Challenges**

Despite Baltimore’s widespread support for community schools, the new direction taken by the Family League poses some challenges. First, out-of-school-time providers and agencies that coordinate community schools used to be “battling for the same pool of money and were not working in a collaborative way,” Baez says. “We’ve asked them to all be friends in this new strategy.”

As a result, some afterschool advocates still have doubts about whether the new approach is in the best interests of children. For example, even though Mitchell at the MOST Network believes that locating afterschool programs in community schools will make the programs stronger, she has been troubled by the fact that the number of afterschool programs has dropped from 60 to 48. “These are things upon which reasonable people can disagree,” she says, while acknowledging
that only a year has passed since the change in the Family Leagues’ approach and that the number of programs may well increase. In most cases, however, OST providers that focused on one single enrichment became sub-contractors for a broader and more comprehensive implementation of the community schools strategy that continues to serve the same number of students.

Other concerns relate to the delivery of all expanded learning opportunities in the schools themselves such that community-based providers would be excluded from afterschool activities delivered in locations other than the schools. In fact, other facilities located near the schools have been involved in ELO. Howard Elementary, for example, is located adjacent to a city-run recreation center that serves about 50 students after school. The center director attends all of the community school staff meetings and works with McDowell to “design programs that fit our families’ needs.”

Nearby, a community-based afterschool care provider serves about 15 students. Until adoption of the new community schools strategy, however, the school did not have much of a relationship with that provider. McDowell now meets with that director once a month and says, “They are more involved in the work we are doing with families.”

Sarbanes notes that continuing to connect and align community schools with other services—such as health care, housing assistance, and nutrition—will be an ongoing challenge. “We have great riches out there, but there is poverty of access,” he says, adding, for example, that Baltimore has a strong arts community, but the artists, musicians, and other practitioners are “connected to schools very unevenly. [The partnerships] are intense in some areas and not in others.”

Another challenge—but also an opportunity—is that many partner agencies hire “day-school” classroom teachers to work during afterschool hours. Baez says that Family League, school and community leaders are just beginning to think about how to involve such teachers in community schools and expanded learning. For example, agencies are partnering with the Baltimore Teachers Union to raise awareness of how afterschool programs and other expanded learning opportunities can support their work. “We want teachers to demand to be in a community school, where someone is providing additional services,” Baez says.

Finally, Sarbanes adds that integrating the community schools philosophy into district operations creates practical challenges for principals who are in the midst of shifting to the Common Core State Standards. Moving toward a community schools philosophy, he says, creates the need to train principals in areas such as developing partnerships and engaging families. The district, in fact, is in the midst of redesigning evaluation frameworks for teachers and school administrators. Sarbanes says that the frameworks address various aspects of community schools implementation but adds that most evaluators “cut their teeth” at a time when most educators were not trained in or did not operate a community school.

The information on the new evaluation system that is available on the school district’s website says, for example, that school leaders “engage families and communities by providing safe, supportive learning environments; facilitating open communication and decision making; and integrating diversity into the school culture.” Nonetheless, only 38 of the district’s 194 schools currently operate with a community school coordinator; in other words, the principals at the other schools lack trained staff to carry out the community schools work, including ELO.
**Supporting Community Schools with Professional Development**

Another challenge related to the Family League’s new strategy is that some of the organizations that run community schools in Baltimore, such as the University of Maryland’s School of Social Work, are large and have the infrastructure to support community school coordinators in their new roles. But smaller, local providers may be stepping into coordinator positions without access to needed expertise. Accordingly, the Family League provides professional development to ensure that providers inexperienced in coordinating partnerships and services—such as those that formerly operated afterschool programs—are poised for success. “If they’re an arts-based program, but we know that they are challenged in teaching literacy, we’ll incorporate literacy activities into art and show how it links to academic achievement,” Baez explains.

Even though Mitchell would like to see the number of sites increase, she has been impressed with the Family League’s investment in technical assistance and professional development. Afterschool program providers also have opportunities for joint planning with community school coordinators to discuss issues such as student data and how expanded learning opportunities target students with the greatest needs, including the chronically absent. Family League also provides professional development during the summer.

**Growth and Sustainability**

At this point, Sarbanes says that it is unclear how funding sources for community schools will grow in the near future. Even though Baltimore can point to some strong organizations and foundations, the work of such organizations is not necessarily connected to community schools. The universities are active, but not quite to the level of funding a coordinator’s position, for example.

He adds that it is possible for some schools to expand their community school work without a full-time coordinator. In some instances, perhaps a university or other organization will decide to fund a coordinator who will work with multiple schools. In the absence of full funding of the state school finance formula, it is also possible, he says, for the district to receive more money from the state if the economy continues to improve. “I’m afraid,” he says, “it’s going to be patchwork for a while.”

Without expanded learning opportunities for children in poor communities—especially over the summer—Sundius is concerned that the achievement gap will grow wider. Both advocates and parents, she says, need to take a larger role in pushing for increased funding. “It is going to take the community saying, ‘I want this for my school, too.’”