Partnering for Impact: Nashville High School Takes a Whole-Child Approach

When Dr. Sonia Stewart, principal at Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet High School, came to Nashville from Chicago, she brought with her both the background knowledge and experience of working with community schools. So in addition to furthering the community schools strategy at Pearl-Cohn, she has helped Community Achieves (CA), the Metro Nashville Public Schools-led initiative, connect to the growth of community schools taking place nationwide.

“I don't think you can do school without this model when you’re looking to care for the whole child and the whole family,” Stewart says.

One of the school district’s 12 high school academies, Pearl-Cohn works with business partners in the city’s rich entertainment industry to give students exposure to different job roles and relationships that make them want to come to school. For example, students intern with Warner Music Nashville, shadowing employees on the job and learning about different aspects of the recording industry.

Awardee At-A-Glance

Location: Nashville, TN
School District: Metro Nashville Public Schools
Grade Levels: 9–12
Number of Students: 720
Race/Ethnicity: African American – 92%, Caucasian – 4%, Hispanic – 4%
ELL Students: 2%
Special Education: 23%
Free/Reduced Lunch: 90%
“It’s more than an internship. Our partners are on the phone with our kids.” Stewart says. “If kids have healthy relationships and are healthy people, they come to school more and misbehave less.”

Pearl-Cohn’s partners fit into two different categories. About 22 organizations focus on the academy theme, while another 36 organizations focus on areas such as mentoring, health, nutrition and wellness. Caterpillar Financial provides mentors who meet with students on a weekly basis, and Family and Children’s Services, in partnership with the United Way, employs family resource director, Michael Copeland, who is co-located at the school. Copeland coordinates responses to families’ needs such as food, clothing, school supplies, and infant necessities.

Tanzye M. Hill, Pearl-Cohn’s Coordinator of Community Schools, is the primary liaison between the school and community partners. She works with teachers, parents, administrators, students and partner organizations to make sure the work of the community school supports the school’s improvement plan. In addition, Hill manages referrals for counseling and other intervention programs. Hill, Copeland and other staff members focusing on nonacademic needs meet quarterly as part of a “personalization team” to discuss which students have needs and which partners can address or are already addressing those needs.

“We don’t partner just for partnering’s sake,” Stewart says. “We partner for impact.”

Since becoming a community school, discipline has significantly declined. There are fewer out-of-school suspensions, and not only have the number of students involved in infractions declined, but the number of infractions overall has declined, Stewart says.

Because of improvement in both school culture and academic indicators, the school has grown from being a “target” school—the lowest rating in the district’s Academic Performance Framework—to reaching the satisfactory level according to the district’s Academic Performance Framework.
Stewart attributes the positive trend not only to making sure the school is a place “where kids feel connected,” but also to the system that the school and the district has created to address issues such as trauma and neglect. That system responded recently when Hill received a text from a student whose mother had died in her home. Hill could immediately contact a partner that focuses on helping students through trauma and grief to determine how to serve that student.

“The kids are familiar with the system now and they trust it. They feel comfortable coming forth with their needs and concerns,” Hill says, giving an example of a girl who recently wrote her teacher a note saying that she couldn’t concentrate or focus on her assignments because of a problem at home.

As part of Community Achieves, Hill belongs to a learning community of other site managers and is the first to receive training and information on topics such as trauma-informed care or social-emotional learning.

“People on the district level can provide more structure for what I’m trying to do,” Hill says. At summer strategic planning meetings, for example, Hill meets alongside other site managers to review data, discuss, and identify, for example, how partners can work with schools in a feeder pattern or how to distribute large donations of clothing.

Each site manager creates a strategic plan that includes information on areas needing improvement and areas where progress has already been made. “It’s a living document,” Hill says. “We are able to change it according to the needs.”

**Key Results**

- School grew 3 levels from target to review to satisfactory in the MNPS framework of school progress.
- Pearl-Cohn’s composite ACT score grew 0.7 of a point in 3 years, faster than the district, and twice as fast as the state.
- School-wide discipline referrals have been lowered by more than 60% over the past five years.
- TVAAS results show the school with a composite score of 5, indicating more than 2 years of academic growth.
ABOUT THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Since 2006, the Coalition for Community Schools, an initiative of the Institute for Educational Leadership, has highlighted the effectiveness and power of community schools across the country. The Awards for Excellence, distributed every two years, highlight schools and initiatives that have become the hub of their neighborhood, created partnerships for better learning, and responded to the unique needs of their students and families so all young people learn and thrive.

This year’s winners were judged on the strength of their partnerships, ability to align supports and opportunities with the school's or initiative’s core mission, engagement of families and the community, commitment to equity, creation of sustainable policy and finance structures, and powerful results.

On behalf of the Coalition for Community Schools Steering Committee, the Awards Selection Committee, and Staff, congratulations to all of our 2017 Award winners!

**Community School Initiative Winners:** Community Achieves (Nashville, TN), NYC Community School Initiative (New York, NY). **Neighborhood Community School Initiative Winner:** Enlace Chicago (IL); **Community School Winners:** Oakland (CA) International High School, Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet High School (Nashville, TN), P.S./M.S. 188 The Island School (New York, NY).

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