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## Community Schools: A Vision of Learning that Goes Beyond Testing

By Ira Harkavy and Martin Blank

Listening to the recent political debate culminating in the passage of the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001, it would be easy to assume that the only things that matter in education are annual testing in grades 3-8, having a qualified teacher in the first four years of schooling, and allowing parents to move their children out of persistently failing schools. Nonsense.

Much more significant, and largely ignored by federal lawmakers as well as other leaders and the public at large, are several provisions of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act that take a more comprehensive—and, in our opinion, a more realistic—view of what it will take to educate all children to succeed as workers, family members, neighbors, and citizens. We especially welcome provisions that:

- Place a high priority on parent involvement in education.
- Emphasize the need to coordinate and integrate school services with the supports and opportunities from other federal, state, and local programs serving children, young people, and families.
- Support after-school enrichment opportunities, programs in such areas as violence prevention, service learning, family literacy, mentoring, mental health, and others, and services that go beyond a narrow focus on core academics.
- Urge an expanded role for community-based organizations, which are now directly eligible for federal education funds through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program and are explicitly encouraged to collaborate with schools.

High academic standards, aligned tests, clear incentives, and strong professional development are important, but they're not sufficient to meet the lofty goal of educating all children to their full potential. Extensive research and experience confirm what common sense suggests: What happens outside the classroom is every bit as important as what happens inside.

The organizational-development expert Peter Senge said it well in the *Community Youth Development Journal*: "Until we go back to thinking about school as the totality of the environment in which a child grows up, we can expect no deep changes. Change requires a community—people living and working together, assuming some common responsibility for something that's of deep concern and interest to all of them, their children."

That community includes our families, neighbors, and community organizations, as well as our health, social-services, and family-support agencies; our youth- and community-development groups; our colleges and universities; and our civic, business, religious, and cultural organizations.

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Many of these groups are now working in schools. That's the good news. Unfortunately, most of these existing collaborations of schools and local partners do not have a compelling vision of the community's learning goals. In the absence of such a shared community vision, educators wind up looking as if they have the sole responsibility for educating our children. That's a no-win trap, especially in this era of higher-stakes accountability. Just as troublesome, without a shared vision, we often find schools with outside partners who are well-meaning and willing, but who have a limited sense of how they connect to learning.

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Here is one such vision that may provide direction where the recent federal legislation falls short. It comes from a group of some 170 organizations, representing many sectors of our society, that are allied in their efforts as the Coalition for Community Schools. The vision is of a true "community school":

*Community schools are public schools that are open to students, families, and community members before, during, and after school, throughout the year. They have high standards and expectations for students, qualified teachers, and rigorous curriculum. The staff knows that students and their families need more to succeed; so community schools do more.*

***A community school recognizes the power of working together for a common good.*** *Before- and after-school programs build on classroom experiences and help students expand their horizons, contribute to their communities, and have fun. Family-support centers help with parent involvement, child-rearing, employment, housing, and other services. Medical, dental, and mental-health services are readily available. Parents and community residents participate in adult-education and job-training programs, and use the school as a place for community problem-solving.*

*Community schools use the community as a resource to engage students in learning and service, and help them become problem-solvers in their communities. Volunteers come to community schools to support young people's academic, interpersonal, and career success.*

*Individual schools and the school system work in partnership with community agencies to operate these unique institutions. Families, students, principals, teachers, and neighborhood residents decide together how to support student learning.*

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Do such community schools work? Absolutely. Evaluation data from such organizations as the Academy for Educational Development, the Stanford Research Institute, the Chapin Hall Centers for Children, and others, recently compiled by the independent researcher Joy Dryfoos, demonstrate the positive impact of community schools on student learning, healthy youth development, family well-being, and community life. Results include students doing better on tests, students improving their attendance and behavior, and families having their basic needs met and being more involved in their children's education. Moreover, principals and teachers in community schools testify that deep and intentional relationships with community partners are not a distraction, but rather are a significant source of support, giving teachers more time to teach and students more opportunity to learn.

Today, several thousand community schools are pursuing this vision in every state in the country, serving urban, rural, and suburban communities. And an even larger number of schools have parts of this vision in place. They are involving just about every sector of the community: school districts, teachers' unions, parks and recreation departments, child- and family-services agencies, Boys and Girls Clubs, local United Ways, YMCAs, Girl and Boy Scout chapters, small and large businesses, museums and zoos, hospitals and health clinics. In some communities, even the forest service and police and fire departments are involved. Local and state governments are providing support.

Some of the better-known programs are national in scope, but the true hallmark of this movement is the diversity of the approaches. Community schools are much more likely to be homegrown, built on local needs and expertise and drawing on national experience.

In our vision of community schools, educators are major partners, but not always in the lead role. A capable partner organization—a child- and family-services agency, for example, or a youth-development organization, a college, or a family-support center—can serve as the linchpin for the community school, mobilizing and integrating the resources of the community, so that principals and teachers can focus on teaching and learning. In some communities, schools themselves will be best equipped to provide the necessary leadership and coordination.

A community school is not just another program being imposed on a school. It is a way of thinking and acting that recognizes the historic central role of schools in our communities—and the power of working together for a common good. Educating our children, yes, but also strengthening our families and communities, so that they, in turn, can help make schools even stronger and children more successful.

Examples of the successful implementation of this idea exist in virtually every state, yet community schools still serve only a minuscule fraction of the 48 million schoolchildren and only a small percentage of the nation's 15,000 school districts. The challenges, then, are fourfold:

- To extend and strengthen community schools in districts and communities across the country through deeper, more focused partnerships;
- To create more intentional linkages between community resources, including after-school activities, and the school-day program;
- To change the mind-set of policymakers and professionals in different fields about the interwoven relationships of school, community, and student learning; and
- To develop state policies that encourage the community schooling approach.

Passage of the No Child Left Behind Act can provide an opportunity. But the widespread adoption of this profoundly important approach to learning will happen only if educators, together with business and political leaders, parents and families, and those who work with children and families every day, think carefully about what it takes for all of our children to succeed.

**Communities can be engaged in the most vital work of a vibrant democracy: the full education of all its children.**

There is public support for this vision of community schools. A recent poll by the Knowledge Works Foundation in Ohio, for example, provides strong evidence that the public sees schools as the center of communities, offering more than merely teaching children their ABCs.

Nearly nine out of 10 respondents agreed that people in the community should be more involved with their local public schools; 84 percent supported community use of school facilities during afternoon, evening, and weekend hours for activities such as health clinics, recreation, parenting classes, and adult education. Seventy-two percent said that adult-fitness classes, community activities, and parenting instruction should be provided in public schools; 79 percent that schools should offer mental-health services for students; and 65 percent that social services for children, such as health and dental clinics and after-school programs, be located in schools. We suspect that similar support exists throughout the country.

The goal is not to heap additional responsibilities onto already burdened educators. It is for schools and communities working together to find creative ways for the communities, with so many assets, to share the responsibility. In that way, schools will no longer be isolated, and entire communities can be engaged in the most vital work of a vibrant democracy: the full education of all its children.

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