COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AT THE CENTER OF PLACE-BASED REFORMS

*Why community schools are the best vehicle for meeting the goals of Cradle to Career, Collective Impact, P-20, Promise Neighborhood, and other ‘place-based’ education approaches.*

The present day challenges facing America’s educational system call for a host of solutions. The growing gap between the rich and poor has left under resourced schools struggling to combat hunger, limited health access, and the effects of poverty while simultaneously trying to raise academic achievement.

Education and community leaders alike are calling for a broad set of approaches that include better instruction and better support to mitigate poverty’s impact on learning. Fortunately, several innovative concepts are emerging that all have the vision of community schools at the center.

Education has been a top priority for President Obama since the early days of his campaign. While many of his most high-profile policies have focused on standards, teacher evaluations, and school turnaround, he has been comprehensive in his support for place-based strategies that provide opportunities and services to children and their families in order to strengthen learning, address social and emotional needs as well as support other nonschool factors.

An example of the administration’s support for addressing the whole child is President Obama’s early support of the Harlem Children’s Zone which he used as a model for the federal Promise Neighborhood program. To date, hundreds of organizations have applied for the program and many of those not receiving an award have remained committed to local partnerships that support students and families.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan highlighted the administration’s commitment to a comprehensive education reform strategy during a recent speech, “Fighting the Wrong Education Battles,” at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Secretary Duncan noted his support for community schools and Promise Neighborhoods, while also underscoring the importance of great schools and teachers, rigorous assessments, and higher standards. “Boosting student achievement is not an either-or solution,” said Secretary Duncan. “Educators and the broader community should be attacking both in-school and out-of-school causes of low achievement.”

The vision of Promise Neighborhoods to provide children and youth with “access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and career” reflects the core principles of the community schools strategy. The fact that nine of the 20 Promise Neighborhood grantees in 2011 explicitly aim to turn their Promise Neighborhood schools into full-service community schools and that others have integrated community school approaches confirms this connection.
In the U.S. Department of Education’s release of the 2011 grants they note that the applications demonstrate “robust family and community engagement strategies evidenced by the community schools approach of many grantees.”

The California State University East Bay Foundation, Inc., which was awarded a 2010 planning grant and a 2011 implementation grant, highlights this connection. Its application states,

> The key and organizing element of our continuum of solutions is transforming the Jackson Triangle schools into Full Service Community Schools to ensure that students have both the academic rigor and the holistic support services necessary to combat the adverse impact of poverty, unsafe streets, and lack of access to health, nutrition, and youth development assets.

In addition to Promise Neighborhoods we have also seen the rise of P-20 Councils, cradle-to-career initiatives, the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Choice Neighborhoods, and others over the past decade. All of these strategies are built on several key principles, but particularly partnership and shared accountability.

These place-based strategies all seek to build a web of learning opportunities and support for students from early education to post-secondary. They recognize the crucial role of public schools as engines for community revitalization.

From the Coalition’s perspective community schools must be at the heart of each initiative if these strategies are to be most effective. Community schools have a reciprocal relationship with the community: they reach out to garner the support of community partners and make the facility and human capital of the school available to all. They are results-driven and seamlessly integrate and align the resources and expertise of community partners to support learning, strengthen families, and build healthier communities.

When the community school vision is embedded into place-based strategies, the potential to achieve the results that everyone seeks is taken to a new level. Many neighborhoods, cities, and counties around the country are using one or more of these place-based strategies. Your community may have applied for a Promise Neighborhood, Choice Neighborhood, or Full Service Community School grant. What’s important is that leaders align strategies and resources and work together to support strong school-community partnerships.

The Coalition’s Scale Up Guide illustrates these principles. The experience of community school initiatives in Tulsa and Portland demonstrate the possibilities when community schools work with place-based initiatives.

**Promise and Choice Neighborhoods Build off Community Schools in Tulsa**

In Tulsa, the Tulsa Area Community School Initiative (TACSI) which is staffed by the Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa (CSC) has been working to organize 31 community schools
across two school districts since 2007. Community schools are now a core feature of the Tulsa and Union Public School district’s strategy to reform its underperforming schools.

A 2010 evaluation of TACSI schools found that, after isolating the effect of poverty, students in fully-developed community schools outperformed students at comparable non-community schools. They also outperformed poor students that attend more affluent non-community schools.

With these impressive results, TACSI community schools provided a perfect hub to build Promise and Choice Neighborhoods around.

The Community Action Project (CAP), a TACSI partner around its early education work, received a Promise Neighborhood planning grant for $500,000 earlier this year to work in the Kendall-Whittier and Eugene Field neighborhoods. Each of these neighborhoods has TACSI community schools at the center and TACSI is a partner in the new efforts.

The Eugene Field community and CAP were also selected as a Choice Neighborhood, another community-collaborative federal program aimed at improving struggling neighborhoods administered through HUD.

By using Promise Neighborhood and Choice Neighborhood grants together, CAP hopes to create a sense of community unity through the development plans for both the Kendall-Whittier and Eugene Field neighborhoods.

In addition to space, these initiatives are sharing leadership. The TACSI Director sits on the Neighborhood Revitalization Advisory Council which is being staffed by the United Way and supports both the Choice and Promise Neighborhoods work. TACSI Community School Coordinators from Kendall Whittier and Eugene Field sit on the Council’s Results-Driven Workgroups and some of the community school site-team members will sit on their Promise and Choice Neighborhood Councils. CAP also has been a key partner in TACSI’s early childhood work. (For more information about TACSI see this article in Tulsa People).

Cradle-to-Career alongside a Community School Initiative

In the Pacific Northwest, Portland area school and community leaders have been building their Cradle-to-Career (C2C) framework in alignment with their successful community schools effort for the past couple of years. Portland is one of seven national demonstration sites for the
Strive Network’s cradle-to-career initiative that originated in the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky area.

Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN), a multi-jurisdictional collaboration that includes 64 community school sites across 6 school districts, has been making a significant impact in its community since 1999. SUN partners have been at the C2C table from the beginning to align the existing collective impact efforts with the broader Cradle to Career effort as it evolves. SUN leaders see SUN as a core strategy for the Portland C2C initiative. Many of these leaders are also on the C2C Council, which governs the Cradle to Career partnership.

SUN’s Coordinating Council was recently selected to serve as a co-convener for a Cradle to Career collaborative focused on two of C2C’s strategic priorities: 1) linking community and family supports to children and youth success and 2) equity. Collaboratives bring together stakeholders around shared goals, outcomes, and action plans to advance the priorities of C2C. (For more information about SUN see this Education Week article).

Conclusion

The Coalition for Community Schools has found that places already using the community school strategy are working out their relationship to these growing place-based initiatives. Community school leaders have always worked to connect strategies at all levels, to build bridges with multiple partners, and to leverage resources.

New place-based strategies are helping community schools reach a broader audience, connect to new partners, leverage new resources, and use data in new and important ways. In turn, community schools are helping these strategies succeed by facilitating deep connections to teachers, principals, families, partners, and of course, students.

No matter the name, efforts to address student academic success as well as health, mental health, social, emotional, career, and other needs should be applauded. As always, collaboration and partnership are the key principles that community schools should consider when working with these strategies. Our hope is that these place-based initiatives explicitly express to their constituents, much like the recent Promise Neighborhoods applicants have, that in order to connect to students and their families, a community school must be at the center.