

Community Schools: The United Way

By Sarah S. Pearson

“Organizing is about transforming private aches and pains into a shared vision of collective action.”

– Robert Putnam, *Better Together*

It takes more than energy, talent, and commitment to unite a community. It also takes passion, time and attention to details to match up the right partners and give them the tools they need to solidify a strong, long-lasting relationship. The United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley (UWGLV), a Coalition for Community Schools partner located in the Northeast corner of Pennsylvania, has been perfecting their matchmaking skills since they launched their ambitious COMPASS Community Schools Initiative (Community Partners for Student Success) in 2005. The Lehigh Valley is composed of three major urban hubs, suburbs, and pockets of rural communities between Philadelphia and New York City.

COMPASS is a collaborative team effort of individuals committed to helping students graduate from high school ready to lead meaningful and productive lives. This approach is consistent with the underlying goals of the United Way of America and serves as a vehicle for addressing critical concerns such as an alarming high school dropout rate and an enduring disconnect between the community and public schools.

Believing that schools need the support of an engaged community to address these challenges, UWGLV staff work their magic to build relationships among those who have a stake in, and a care for the health of youth and families in the community. “We’re not single-issue focused, we’re community focused. It’s not just about children and youth, it’s about adults, families and the neighborhood,” said Susan Gilmore, president, UWGLV.

They work to engage the business community, medical clinics or linked healthcare services, family centers, preschools and daycares, comprehensive after school programs, community service programs through local colleges, and more.



School-Community Matchmaker

“Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match, find me a find, and catch me a catch... .” Those words from Fiddler on the Roof describe what the UWGLV does as an [intermediary](#) to link-up partners in the community. “It really is about a marriage of shared community responsibility,” said Marci Ronald, Director of COMPASS.

As an intermediary, UWGLV COMPASS convenes partners, funds and sustains relationship building, and provides the training and technical assistance needed to develop a solid community school framework and plan for success. At present, the two-county, three school district COMPASS Community Schools initiative includes five lead partner organizations, serving seven sites (or 11 schools). “It truly is a marriage between the school, the school district, and a community based organization (CBO). In just three years, we’ve had tremendous growth, success, and energy around what it takes to engage CBOs, schools, districts, and others to work together, for the long-term, around a common mission for students in our

community,” said Ronald. Other partners include higher education institutions, local hospitals, local business and corporations, local government, and others.

The COMPASS Strategy

COMPASS Community School strategy works to mobilize partners, focusing on quality early childhood programs, quality education for all, positive youth development opportunities, basic needs of students and families, mutual respect and effective collaboration of parents and educators, and safe, supportive school environments.

Measures and Accountability

COMPASS is a blend of three models: the United Way’s Community Impact strategy, the core ingredients of a Community School championed by the Children’s Aid Society in New York, and Mark Friedman’s Results-Based Accountability (RBA) framework. Each COMPASS Community School develops a results-based plan that is designed to support the principal’s accountability or building plan.

An [end-of-year Community School report card](#) is developed by the site-based leadership team (composed of the Community School coordinator, lead partner, principal, and other partners) from all COMPASS Community Schools. Data collected provides information about the numbers of students in before-school, after-school, summer school activities, adults in adult education, and more. Also measured is how well services were provided to highest-need students and families, including the number of programs/strategies connected to the academic curriculum, programs targeted to students performing below grade level, and more. (See section on *Impact* for data highlights.)

Lead Partners

Every COMPASS Community School is linked with a lead partner organization, which functions as 1) fiscal agent, 2) supervisor of the Community School Coordinator, 3) gatherer of resources on behalf of their school partnership, and 4) champion for the school and the initiative. Together, the lead partner and school form a site-based leadership team that serves as the engine for the work to be done in creating an effective Community School.

Lead partners include:

- Boys & Girls Club of Allentown,
- Communities In Schools,
- The Center for Humanistic Change, and
- The Northampton Community College.

Lead partners meet regularly to discuss resource development, challenges, successes, and strategies for engaging the broader community. Experienced lead partners mentor newer partners.

Community School Coordinators

Community School coordinators, employed by lead partner organizations, assist in finding or matching up other partners from within the community to address the most critical challenges that students and families face. This may include procuring services to provide food, clothing, and medical care. Also they match the school with quality after school programs that are linked to academics, school to work or career preparation opportunities, easy-to-access adult education, parenting programs, and more. “We know that all of those things contribute to school and life success, and by organizing the best of the community under one roof, we can reach our goal to help Lehigh Valley students graduate from high school ready to lead meaningful and productive lives,” said Ronald.

Volunteers

An integral component to the COMPASS strategy are volunteers from among vested stakeholders who are encouraged by the UWGLV to work collaboratively to ensure that the school and surrounding community are doing their best for children, youth, families and neighborhoods. “Our board of volunteers is comprised of representatives of corporate and business partners, school districts, county government officials, higher education, parents, retired community members, lead partners, and others,” said Ronald.

Impact

COMPASS staff and partners see the initial results of their investment in the initiative. Results fluctuate among Community Schools, but evidence is mounting around improved behavior and attendance, improved parent engagement, and a rise in the number of engaged community partners, some of whom are relocating their services to the school. Other areas of improvement include corporations identifying ways to bring adult volunteers and mentors to assist students, lead partner organizations building capacity in their own organizations to bring resources to support the partnership, schools shifting or blending their funding to assist with the growth of the initiative, and changes in policies to accommodate shared facility usage.

“The Community School model is a vehicle in which the community as a whole can invest in public education. It’s a comprehensive and powerful package of programs and services designed to reach students and families who need it the most,” said Ronald.

Matchmaking is Only the Beginning

UWGLV and COMPASS are a few years into their Community School initiative, but plan to go much further with their matchmaking. “With this model we have an opportunity for real change. This is about sharing power, accountability, and results between the CBOs, businesses, parents, and schools on behalf the children in this community,” said Ronald.

Learn more about COMPASS, including how they address funding and fundraising, what local school leaders say, capacity building, getting faculty and district staff on board, data on results, and more by downloading the full story at:

www.communityschools.org



Coalition for Community Schools

The Coalition mobilizes the resources and capacity of multiple sectors and institutions to create a united movement for community schools. Our goals are to share information about successful community school policies, programs, and practices; build broader public understanding of and support for community schools; inform public and private-sector policies to strengthen community schools; and develop sustainable sources of funding for community schools. For more information, visit www.communityschools.org.

