

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A SERIES OF STORIES, RESULTS,
AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM
SEVEN YEARS OF
EDUCATION INVESTING BY
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



SCHOOL, COMMUNITY, FAMILY **CONNECTIONS**

THROUGH ITS EDUCATION INVESTMENTS, THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION HELPS ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE GRADUATE FROM SCHOOL PREPARED TO SUCCEED AS ADULTS BY SUPPORTING QUALITY SCHOOL CHOICES AND STRONG SCHOOL/COMMUNITY/FAMILY CONNECTIONS.

Casey believes that strong relationships among schools, communities, and families are necessary if schools that serve low-income children are to close the achievement gap and help young people graduate ready to succeed in life.

“We tend to take these types of connections for granted, but they don’t exist in disinvested neighborhoods,” said Bruno Manno, senior associate for education at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

In the past seven years, Casey’s education program has supported a variety of efforts to create and sustain strong school/community/family connections and partnerships, including community schools, community organizing, school district outreach efforts, and out-of-school programs.

This publication provides an in-depth look at Casey’s support of community schools, including selected results and lessons learned. It also includes stories about one California school district’s innovative parent engagement policy, the Harlem Children’s Zone Practitioners Institute, parent organizing in Texas and Denver, and the Foundation’s contributions to results measurement in the connections field.



“If basic bonds between schools, families, community organizations, and service providers exist, then children have a better chance of graduating prepared to succeed.” *Bruno Manno, Casey Foundation*

Community Schools Are One Connections Strategy

Community schools are public schools that are enhanced by coordinated partnerships with organizations that provide diverse activities and programs for students, families, and community members. These schools function as hubs of community life and often include physical, dental, and mental health care; homework clubs; social services; youth development; adult education; early childhood education; and community development to support student learning.

Research shows that community schools can improve student learning, increase parent participation, give teachers more time to focus on instruction, and contribute to making schools and the community safer. They are most effective when partners share a common vision and coordinate activities to achieve the desired results. A close look at Casey-supported community schools reveals other key elements that help community schools succeed.

A Community School in Indianapolis Gets Results

George Washington Community School has the highest graduation rate in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). Seventy percent of the school’s seniors received diplomas in 2007, which stands out in stark contrast to the low-point graduation rate of 30 percent at the school that George Washington replaced. The school serves 874 students in grades seven through 12, and almost 90 percent of them qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

George Washington is generally open for scheduled activities six days a week, and there is an extensive menu of school-based services for students and families. A nearby community center offers preschool, kindergarten, and after-school care.

RESULTS AT GEORGE WASHINGTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Impact

- Graduation rate of 70 percent in 2007, the highest in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) for the second year in a row.
- 84 percent of 2007 graduates went on to post-secondary education.
- 89 percent attendance rate in 2006–2007.
- 290 parents participated in financial literacy program services.
- 650 community residents attended a 30-employer job fair.

Influence

- More than 50 partnerships with universities, major nonprofits, community centers, businesses, and other groups.
- New businesses have opened in the neighborhood since the community school opened.
- New home construction and renovation valued at more than \$33.4 million is under way in the community surrounding the school.
- Two community members who helped create the school are now on the Indianapolis school board.

- 2006 Coalition for Community Schools inaugural National Community School Award.

Leverage

- IPS is investing \$27 million in renovating the school building.
- Sustained funding for the full-time community school coordinator.

“We need someone in the full-time community school coordinator role. Teachers and principals have to be focused on instruction, especially under No Child Left Behind and state assessments.” *Mary Louise Bewley, Indianapolis Public Schools*

One rainy morning last spring, a pair of PhD candidates led a focus group for students at the school to identify activities they would like to see added. Students suggested photography classes, more parent-teacher contacts, smaller class sizes, and parenting workshops. Principal Keith Burke leaned against the door jam, drinking his morning coffee. Jim Grim, the community school coordinator, sat forward attentively in his chair.

In the room next door, Grim’s desk was buried in file folders, used coffee cups, and an overstuffed Rolodex. A long to-do list surfed on top. While he answered a visitor’s questions, he fielded phone calls and attended to his e-mail. “It’s a juggling act,” said Grim. “There aren’t enough hours in the day to do everything I want to do, so I have to pick the priorities.”

“It would unravel without him,” said Diane Arnold, a community member who helped found the school and who now serves on the Indianapolis school board. Early on, Casey invested \$181,000 to help fund Grim’s position.

A Disinvested Neighborhood Creates a Community School

George Washington Community School is located a mile west of downtown Indianapolis in a group of neighborhoods known as the Near Westside. Only 5 percent of adults in the community have a college education, and average annual household income is just under \$20,000.

Back in the 1990s, Washington High School had been struggling for a long time, so IPS decided to close the school. Community members were upset.

“When I was growing up, Washington High School was a haven,” said Arnold, who went to Washington and married her high school sweetheart. “When the district closed the school, the heart got cut out of the community. It was the death knell for the neighborhood.”

Community Organizing Gets Parents Involved in Their Children's Education

Casey has invested in community organizing to improve outcomes for low-income children. Organizers work with parents, students, teachers, and community members to understand school and student data, identify issues, and work with public officials to define solutions.

In Texas, the Industrial Areas Foundation and the state education department started the Texas Interfaith Education Alliance initiative in the 1990s. Under the initiative, which now includes 89 schools, school-community teams have successfully attracted tutors and scholarships, developed after-school programs, and spearheaded changes to curriculum and assessment methods. Casey provided the Alliance with general operating support totaling \$1.3 million over six years.

In Denver, Metro Organizations for People (MOP) began organizing low-income parents and students in schools in 2001. A MOP training on the achievement gap galvanized parents, teachers, students, and community leaders to come together and talk to district leaders about inequality in Denver's public schools.

MOP parents have proposed that the district consider a weighted student funding approach, in which money follows the student rather than the teacher, and district leaders are listening. As a result of MOP's work, which got off the ground with Casey support totaling \$155,000, parents have new capacity and power, and they participate regularly in school improvement policy discussions.



“We think that parent engagement means that parents volunteer, but I think it can mean more than that.” *Kevin Paterson, Denver School Board*

A Groundbreaking Parent Involvement Policy

In San Diego public schools, Casey invested \$800,000 over four years to support a district-led effort to foster parent engagement and improve communication between parents and schools. The result is a groundbreaking parent involvement policy that links parents to schools at the classroom, building, and district levels.

The San Diego school district includes 202 schools and 138,000 students and is the eighth largest district in the country. It serves a diverse population that is 42 percent Latino, 26 percent white, 17 percent Asian American, and 15 percent black. In 2002, the San Diego school board created a 25-member work group to craft parent involvement standards. Participants included the superintendent, the school board, parents, teachers, and principals.

The standards ensure that all parents, regardless of income, race, or language, will experience high-quality communications and interaction with schools and school leaders. The San Diego policy won a top award in 2005 from the *American School Board Journal*, and the California Department of Education is using it as a template for creating the first statewide parent involvement standards.



In response to the school closure, Arnold, other neighbors, and community organizations came together with a nearby university to form the Westside Education Task Force. With support from Casey, the task force researched successful school models around the country, and the group decided that a full-service community school was the answer for the Near Westside. In 2000, IPS agreed to reopen the former high school as a community school serving grades seven to 12.

How It Works

There are currently more than 50 school partners, and they all work toward a common mission — creating the necessary conditions for learning so children graduate prepared for college and work. Their goals are for 100 percent of students to graduate and for 95 percent of graduates to go on to college.

The community school coordinator communicates regularly with partners, helps navigate the school district bureaucracy, makes sure that parents and students have a voice in decision-making, and communicates with visitors and the media. “You need someone like Jim to create and nurture relationships and sustain them,” said Mary Louise Bewley of IPS.

The principal also plays a central role. When school leadership shifted from the founding principal to Burke, Grim and the schools partners made it a top priority to bring the new

“I’ve had to go through a paradigm shift about how I think about leadership. It’s the difference between being a football coach and a facilitator.” Keith Burke, George Washington Community School

principal on board. Every month, Principal Burke facilitates a meeting of the community advisory committee, which consists of partners, students, parents, service providers, neighborhood leaders, teachers, and school staff. The committee makes consensus recommendations regarding school programs and academic achievement plans.

In 2006, the school won the Coalition for Community Schools inaugural National Community School Award.

Community Schools in White Center, Washington

White Center neighborhood, an unincorporated area between Seattle and Burien, features small, neatly painted houses with tidy yards and well-tended gardens. Many of its 32,000 residents are refugees and immigrants from Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. Roughly a quarter of adults do not have high school diplomas, and many work two jobs. More than 50 languages are spoken in the community.

The Community Schools Program (CSP) began when a Casey-funded comprehensive community initiative called *Making Connections* did a community survey in White Center and held a major community meeting in 2001. More than 300 residents identified four issues they wanted to work on. School success was one of these, and a group of residents decided they wanted to open a community school.

Making Connections focuses on economic development and early childhood education, not schools, but the *Making Connections* site team introduced the White Center community group to other donors and facilitated funding relationships. Casey's education program invested \$50,000 over three years.

The community group formed an advisory board and got sizable initial grants from local foundations. At the same time, Highline School District, which serves children and families in the neighborhood, was building a new school facility for White Center Heights Elementary and invited community residents to participate in building design.

"It was like designing our own home," said White Center resident and CSP board member Sili Mana'o Savusa. "When White Center Heights Elementary opened in 2003, the community and the board were so proud. When we held our open house at the new school building, it was like giving birth."

Ninety percent of the students served by the school are children of color, and 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. CSP activities at White Center Heights included Homework Club, Somali Language and Culture Class, Art for Parents and Kids, Poetry in Motion, Girls' Club, English as a Second Language, Domestic Violence Awareness, and First Aid Classes.

"We had lots of money for the first three years. We couldn't spend it fast enough, and we felt pressured to expand into a third school." Sili Mana'o Savusa, White Center Resident

Fourth-grade reading and math test scores at the school rose in 2004 and 2005, and the CSP expanded to nearby Mount View Elementary School, where Principal David Darling saw multiple benefits from having the program in his school.

The after-school homework club helped children with school performance, he said, and parents who came for English classes could leave their children in child care while they studied. In addition, families got more involved in the school. "We got a huge turnout for community events," said Darling.

Growing Pains

The Community Schools Program was doing well, but challenges began to emerge in the summer of 2006, when the program director and the community advisory board became aware of pending time limits on grants. They felt pressured to spend the money, so they expanded the program to a third site without adequate planning. At the same time, the principal who helped found the CSP at White Center Heights Elementary left for a job out of state, and her replacement was not as proactive in supporting the program.

Then, in January 2007, the director of the CSP quit suddenly and took most of the day-to-day program management knowledge with her. "She had all the business in her head," said Sharmu Luna, who works for the program.



Harlem Children's Zone Shares Successful Practices

In New York, Casey supports connections by investing in a comprehensive community building initiative in Harlem. Launched in 2001, the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) combines educational, social, and medical services to improve outcomes for low-income children.

HCZ reaches 8,600 children in a neighborhood where more than 60 percent of children live below the poverty line, and 75 percent score below grade level on state reading and math tests.

The organization aims for all its children to perform at the same level as the city's middle-class students. Collaborating with 20 best-practice programs, HCZ has set up a seamless network to support young people from birth through college. HCZ is at work in seven public elementary schools, and it runs two charter schools.

A central component of HCZ's strategy is the New York City Beacons, school-based community centers that transform local schools into thriving neighborhood centers after school hours. Beacons are safe and supervised places for young people to get homework help and tutoring, do cultural activities, and recreate. Beacons also provide adult programming such as computer training, career workshops, and on-site social services.

HCZ recently opened the Practitioners Institute to train people from around the world in the HCZ model. Casey has invested \$1.125 million over ten years to support HCZ's Beacons schools and the Practitioners Institute.

“People want to force the direct correlation between the connections strategy and student outcomes, but a simple and focused program result that provides a stepping-stone to student achievement is OK.” Bruno Manno, Casey Foundation



Casey Contributes to Improving Results Measurement for Connections Programs

In today's funding environment, few programs can expect ongoing support from government agencies and foundations unless they can demonstrate that their services are achieving desired outcomes. Boards of directors, community members, and the people served also want to know if programs are getting results. The problem of results measurement is thorny for school/community/family connections strategies, because it is difficult to define and demonstrate a causal link between program activities and improved student outcomes.

To contribute to advancing meaningful results measurement among connections grantees, Casey has invested roughly \$600,000 in the development of results frameworks, reflection tools, and evaluation for connections programs.

Through a series of grants to the Coalition for Community Schools, Casey supported a synthesis of 20 existing evaluations of community schools programs, as well as the Coalition's work on a rigorous results framework for community schools.

The Foundation has also supported results measurement projects through the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute, including a two-stage evaluation of the New York City Beacons program. The Fund, which provides ongoing capacity building for the Beacons, incorporated the findings into its training activities. In addition, Casey has supported a self-assessment tool for individual Beacons directors.

Composed of social workers, parents, and community workers, the community advisory board realized they did not have the capacity to create and oversee a strategic expansion plan, nor did they know how to track results in a way that satisfied donors.

Although the board requested and received some coaching and board development, it wasn't enough. As a result, funding contracted drastically, and the board had to make significant program cuts. Participating schools felt the difference. "The quality of students' homework dropped off," said Wilma Bugalino, fifth-grade teacher at White Center Heights.

Recently, the resilient board found a local umbrella organization with mission alignment to serve as fiscal sponsor and handle program administration.

In addition, CSP leader Mana'o Savusa has been elected to serve on the district school board. "Our vision is that community schools are the way we do education across all of Highline School District," she said.

Next Steps for Casey and Connections

Casey's education program will continue to pursue its connections strategy, and it will broaden its thinking to include connections throughout the lifespan of a person, from preschool to college and beyond.

LESSONS: KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

- A full-time community school coordinator marshals community resources and ensures that everything works together to achieve desired results.
- Partners are actively involved and work toward a common mission.
- The principal is completely engaged and committed.
- When the principal changes, the coordinator and the partners deliberately seek buy-in from the new leader.
- The governance structure includes all stakeholders.
- Community leaders, service providers, parents, and students are at the table from the outset. Local businesses and business leaders participate.
- The principal, partners, teachers, and school staff share a common vision to raise student achievement.
- The school district supports the program.
- Financing is diversified.
- Successful program expansion requires good timing, sufficient funding to maintain programs during a period of rapid growth, and active involvement from partners.

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

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