



Dispelling the Myth by Working Together

Recently the [Education Trust](#) honored three outstanding public schools at their Twelfth Annual Dispelling the Myth Awards ceremony. These schools were chosen because, “[they] are doing the right thing for kids: providing a rich, coherent curriculum and making it interesting and engaging for their students. In the process, they are making themselves the kinds of places where teachers want to teach.” And they are doing this in schools whose students come from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Menlo Park Elementary (Portland, Ore.) is one of those schools. Part of the [David Douglas School District](#), Menlo Park is also part of the [Schools Uniting Neighborhoods](#) (SUN) Community School Initiative. Managed by Multnomah County, and in partnership with the City of Portland, school districts, the State of Oregon and a multitude of other partners, there are currently 81 SUN Community Schools in 6 school districts across the Portland area. [Camp Fire Columbia](#) is the non-profit that the county partners with to run this specific school. The full-service package of services aligned and accessible through SUN includes academic support, early childhood programs, family engagement, access to health and mental health services, and much more.

We sat down with Menlo Park’s principal, Kellie Burkhardt and SUN Site Manager, Steven Joinson, to take a deeper look at how Menlo Park is re-writing the script on achievement levels and increasing opportunities for our most vulnerable youth – and it should be no surprise they aren’t doing this work alone.

Changing demographics and changing needs

Like most places in this country, if you walked into your classroom from 30 years ago you’d notice something right away – the demographic makeup of the students has changed dramatically. Once an affluent, mostly white neighborhood, today David Douglas’s families speak over 70 languages, and 80% of Menlo Park’s students meet the qualifications for free and reduced lunch. As Kellie told us, “when I graduated from David Douglas High School in the 80s there were approximately two African American students in my entire graduating class.” With this shift, comes new challenges – and opportunities.

Before students walk in the doors, there are many other issues they are facing. Students are arriving to school hungry and some of their parents are wondering how they are going to keep the electricity on after the coming week. Thankfully, Steven and his team are working to mitigate these obstacles. Steven is the SUN community school coordinator, or the "community organizer" of the school and community. In this role he creates, strengthens, and maintains the bridge between the school, the partners, and community. There before, during, and after the school day, he is embedded in the life of the school.

And as such, he is well aware of the struggles in the school’s community. We often ask how students can learn when they are hungry, and the answer is they cannot. Working in partnership with [Urban Gleaners](#), some students are sent home with backpacks of food. With such a strong demand in the

school, next on the horizon is a partnership with the [Oregon Food Bank](#), so the school can open a full emergency food pantry within its walls.

Steven also explains, “We have a lot of families who are unable to pay their utility bills. It’s a huge challenge and we are trying to make sure they are referred to the right people and get the help they need...Then they stay in the community.” Having formed relationships with [Portland General Electric](#) and [Human Solutions](#), parents are given support as they work through these issues. As Steven mentioned, the partner agencies know when he is calling, and make sure those families are a priority on their list.

These types of relationships are common in community schools across the country. Community schools leverage the assets of the community and bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to youth, their families and the broader community. Partners work in tandem with the school to achieve a multitude of results. From attending school consistently, to making sure families are increasingly involved with their children’s education, to ensuring students are healthy - physically, socially, and emotionally; partnerships are in place to make sure students’ out of school needs will not hurt their academic potential.

The fight against absent students

Chronic absence is a large issue at Menlo Park; but, they are rallying the troops to make sure their students don’t fall through the cracks. On a normal day in South East Portland you may see Kellie and her staff driving around and knocking on doors. “I always leave a hand written note letting students and families know we are missing them, and on occasion I tell [the students] to get their shoes, they are coming with us,” Kellie shares. It’s not every day you see a school principal driving around, making sure as many students are in school as possible, and what you definitely don’t see is the coordinated effort behind this action.

Prior to the carpool, there is a team devoted to making sure students get to school. Steven sits on this team (as well as many others in the school) along with the school’s counselor and other school staff. At the first sign of chronic absence, the team makes sure they have positive calls with the parents. This helps to create trust and more open conversations, both Kellie and Steven explain. They do their best to make sure they meet parents where they are, have multiple family nights so parents can see them when they aren’t in “professional mode,” and anything that can create a positive relationship. And they are seeing results. They now have the conversations with parents about what is preventing that child from getting to school and are working through these barriers as a team.

Expanding learning for students

Students do not just receive rigorous, real-world learning during the school day. Coordinated by the SUN team, students participate in a variety of enriching afterschool and summer programs – from specialized programs for English language learners through the Rosetta Stone Language Tutoring program to the [Early Kindergarten Transition Program \(EKT\)](#), a summer program designed to for incoming kindergarten students and their families to acclimate to the routine and school community, the SUN team works hard to ensure the needs of the students are met. Steven explained, “Teachers come to us and let us know when a student needs help in a certain area. Then I go and find help for that student. It means [the student] gets the targeted support they need to feel confident and we see the success of these efforts in

the classroom.” While not every student is able to participate in the afterschool programming, “we work hard to make sure any student that needs it, gets the support they need. While there are limited spaces, if a teacher says this student needs something, we make it work.”

Striving for the same goals

All of this work is driven with one main goal in mind – that students succeed, and this is achieved through teamwork. This team dynamic is replicated from how teachers work together, to the SUN programs and school staff hybrid teams, to the secretaries and custodial staff’s involvement in putting these policies and ideas into practice. When Kellie came to Menlo Park just six months ago she remembers that in a non-SUN school, “the partnerships were just different. It was a huge relief to have all of this in place – and all work together toward the same goals. And Steven is not just a SUN coordinator, he is part of the staff, and part of the group working toward the goal.” She continued, “These kids have options and we are here to help them achieve their dreams. Every person is invested in the growth of every child.”

In this school the teachers have high expectations for the students and their colleagues. They understand that in order to make sure students succeed, they need to use the variety of resources around them. They have Steven and his team, who can help them address issues they may not get to in the school day. They have a Principal who wants them to succeed and feel supported and they are all on the same page. It’s the numerous teams of support woven together that make Menlo Park so successful.

Steven closed, “This is important to me because I was this child, I was the child that was served. For me it’s important to open as many doors and windows as I can. And being a SUN school we can open as many windows and doors as possible. Even if it’s basic, it’s important, and we figure it out.”

Congratulations to Menlo Park Elementary for Dispelling the Myth. Yes it takes a strong leaders, qualified teachers and a challenging curriculum, but it also take a community that organizes itself to support young people’ success. That is what SUN Community Schools do and what community schools are doing in growing numbers across the country.