When Principal Richard Zapien and Community School Coordinator Stefanie Eldred first arrived at Hillcrest Elementary almost a decade ago, she was the Parent Liaison, and he was the Instructional Reform Facilitator. They encountered animosity between teachers and students, fights breaking out on the playground, and no community partners willing to get involved in such a contentious environment.

“Services can’t be delivered effectively when there is no stability,” says Eldred. So she and the then-principal made improving school climate their top priority—first by building stronger relationships with families in this diverse, southeast San Francisco neighborhood. Other key focal areas were providing professional development for teachers and interventions and support services for students. They knew these changes would translate into better behavior and engagement in the classroom. Eldred explains, “As much as this was about the kids, the teachers were the primary focus of our work when we started. We wanted to help teachers get what they needed to feel supported and to be able to focus on quality and innovative instruction. Without the buy-in of classroom teachers, a community school can only go so far.”

Today, Hillcrest’s climate is far more stable, inviting, and inclusive than it was 10 years ago. Rather than fighting on a regular basis, students are now better equipped to solve their own problems. Teachers lead daily community-building activities in their classrooms that help support a healthy climate, and there is a robust focus on professional development to help teachers meet the needs of their students.

Hillcrest serves 460 students in kindergarten through fifth grades. 90% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 65% are English Language Learners, and 16% have special needs. Hillcrest has a wonderfully diverse student body that is 43% Latino, 25% Chinese, 9% African American, 6% Filipino, and 12% Other Non-White.

**Hillcrest’s Community School Structure**

Hillcrest’s development as a community school began with a state-funded Healthy Start grant in 2006. A broad array of partners at Hillcrest now provide academic support, health and wellness services, parent education and engagement opportunities, out-of-school time programs, community events, mentoring services, and professional development for staff.

A Partner Collaborative, involving both community partners and school administrators, meets monthly to address challenges, set priorities, and measure collective impact. But this is just one structure that supports the work of the community school. A separate collaborative of mental health providers meets bi-weekly to present case studies and consult with one another. There is also a Community School Leadership Team, which meets weekly and includes the after-school director, Principal Zapien and Eldred, and rotating representatives from...
partner organizations. Both parents and partners participate on Hillcrest’s School Site Council, and in 2012, the school created a Climate Committee to continue improving school climate and to address the needs of students with more serious needs, such as symptoms of trauma.

The Afterschool Program

With Hillcrest’s school day beginning at 7:50 a.m. and ending at 1:50 p.m., the school has a longer after-school period than most. This schedule presents the afterschool program (ASP) staff with a significant challenge, but also with an opportunity to use the more than four hours of time to develop programming that provides expanded learning time and really benefits students and families.

When Zapien and Eldred first began working at Hillcrest, about 100 students participated in the ASP, and no spots were available for students in kindergarten or 1st grade. Students attending the ASP were confined to the auditorium and the cafeteria. Eldred explains that teachers had no connections with the ASP staff, and that the ASP staff experienced a lot of turnover. As a result, teachers were not interested in letting the ASP use their classrooms.

Creating a seamless relationship between the school day and expanded learning programs has therefore been a primary focus of Hillcrest’s community school initiative. With students’ literacy development as the program’s overall goal, the ASP is now organized in a systematic way to support the learning that happens during the school day. In 2007, the administration created six, full-time “linked-day” ASP positions—one for each grade level. These employees play an important supporting role in the classrooms for their grade level during the school day and then carry over the same teaching strategies to the ASP using project-based learning and other enrichment opportunities. Linked-day staff members meet regularly with teachers and use the same messages and emphasis on positive climate present during the school day. Hillcrest’s ASP now serves 235 of the school’s 460 students.

To further create consistency for both students and teachers, Hillcrest also invested in the careers of ASP staff. Many of the part-time ASP staff members have transitioned into the linked-day positions, and many linked-day staff members are pursuing careers in teaching and social work, in part due to their experience at Hillcrest.

Literacy-Focused Academics

One of the school’s most significant partners is The Reading and Writing Project of Columbia University’s Teachers College (TCRWP). TCRWP is considered an expert in Balanced Literacy, which is an approach that Hillcrest uses to teach reading, writing and speaking. Teachers, linked-day staff, and community partners participate in professional development focused on Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop that are led by TCRWP Staff Developers. A site-based professional development coach also meets monthly with linked-day staff members to guide them in transferring these practices from the school day into the ASP.

Beyond relying on state tests, to better capture students’ reading growth, the school administers quarterly

Results

Among Students

- 11% increase in California Standardized Test scores across all grades between 2010-12
- Academic Performance Index rose from 674 to 725 between 2010–12
- 100% school staff check in with 2+ students per week about personal matters; 48% check in with 8+

Among Families

- 80 core parent volunteers and committee members, up from five in 2004
- Parents run a food bank that serves 80 families each week
- 90% attendance at parent-teacher conferences, up from 50% in 2005
Fountas & Pinnell benchmark reading assessments so that teachers can better identify which students need additional help. Reading Partners, a key community partner at Hillcrest, also provides a literacy program providing one-on-one tutoring for 50 readers who struggling the most. Student progress is regularly shared with school day teachers, creating a stronger link with ASP and providing even more data to use for planning and instruction.

Since 2010, Hillcrest’s California Standardized Test scores have increased 11% in both math and language arts, and the school’s Academic Performance Index—an overall measure of student achievement ranging from 200 to 1,000—has increased from 674 to 725.

“It’s our moral imperative to teach our students the skills they will need to be successful at school and in their community,” Zapien says. “We have embraced the Common Core State Standards and are providing our staff with rigorous professional development to meet the individualized needs of our students.”

Parent Participation Grows

While the attention to literacy has been comprehensive at Hillcrest, the community partners are serving students and families in many other ways as well. One of the school’s leading partners, Instituto Familiar de la Raza (IFR), supports mental health consultants at Hillcrest—one during the school day and one after school. IFR’s Family Resource Center, Casa Corazon, also provides parenting classes, leadership seminars for parents, and social support groups.

Other services for parents have included English-as-a-second-language and computer classes. Eldred points out that she would also like to see the community school offer job training. The support and services provided to families has resulted in parents taking a more active role in their children’s education. In 2005, only about 50% of the school’s parents showed up for parent-teacher conferences. Now, 95% attend, encouraged by the teachers and supported by simultaneous translation provided by the school in Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Spanish. Parent volunteers also run a weekly food bank, in partnership with the San Francisco Food Bank that serves 80 families. A rotating group of parents prepares a fresh fruit snack during recess every day for all 460 students at the school.

In addition to offering academic support, the ASP also has numerous enrichment opportunities. Many Hillcrest ASP students are avid soccer players through the America SCORES Bay Area program. The organization supports five Hillcrest soccer teams that run after school, and the program also incorporates poetry and service learning into its model. The SCORES coach is an integral member of the school staff and is on-site beginning at lunch. The ASP also includes an art club run by a volunteer artist who turns the cafeteria into an art studio every day from 5-6 p.m. When parents arrive after work, they often linger to work on artistic creations with their children, Eldred says.

Working Towards Sustainability

While Hillcrest’s community school initiative was launched with the Healthy Start grant, the program now receives funding from a variety of sources, including the school district, private foundations, a federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, and state funding through the After School Education and Safety Program.
Through its partnerships with 35 community partners, Hillcrest leverages almost $1.4 million yearly to support services for students, families, and teachers.

San Francisco’s Department of Children, Youth and Their Families (DCYF) provides funding for after-school and summer programming, but is also playing a leadership role in developing policy and creating partnerships between agencies. As Eldred notes, the community school is actively involved in efforts to grow and sustain community school work in San Francisco. In part because of Hillcrest’s advocacy work with DCYF, for example, the agency now supports out-of-school-time programs at school sites, in addition to those in the community. Hillcrest’s out-of-school programming director is involved in DCYF’s Summer Work Group, and Eldred serves on a Financial Sustainability Work Group.

“We’re really good at thinking outside the box and thinking bigger than ourselves,” Eldred says. “We understand that in order to sustain and grow our model, we can’t be a one off. We always have one foot on the macro level, and one foot on site, improving and evaluating our work so that we can help to create a replicable community school model. Our job, after ensuring our own sustainability, is to advocate for every school to have the critical supports and services, as well as the underlying coordination, needed to help every student and family succeed to their fullest potential.”

One challenge Hillcrest faces is securing ongoing funding for the linked-day staff members. Linked-day staff are currently paid through discretionary Title I funds, a decision made by administrators, along with teachers, because of the deep support all staff have for the program.

Hillcrest leaders are continuing their work to see that community schools grow throughout SFUSD. Both Eldred and Zapien participate in a Sustainability Work Group with SFUSD’s Director of Community Schools, Hayin Kim.