Joan Devlin, Senior Associate Director at American Federation of Teachers (AFT), interview with the Coalition for Community Schools

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The Coalition conducted an interview with long-time AFT executive Joan Devlin on her experience espousing the union perspective with the community schools strategy. The interview for the Coalition Newsletter is in conjunction with the publication of a joint report between the Center for American Progress and the Coalition highlighting community-school partnerships. Joan is retiring at the end of January 2012 and has been a long-time member of the Coalition’s Steering Committee.

Codes: Reuben Jacobson (RJ), Ryan Fox (RF), Joan Devlin (JD)

Ryan Fox, Coalition for Community Schools: First question, what is the union role in the community school strategy?

Joan Devlin, Senior Associate Director at American Federation of Teachers: I think that the role is in marketing. We have always been supportive of community schools in the districts that were invited to the table. There have been however, too many places where the union hasn’t been included and while they still support the services that students are getting, there is no real commitment to the alignment of educational programs to afternoon programs and services that are really essential if you are going to build an effective community school.

RF: Why do you think that lack of commitment has been there? Is there a specific reason?

(3:00) JD: I think that there are a number of reasons. I think that where it’s the district we can look to community-based organizations to provide services, they don’t think that they have to include the union.

Reuben Jacobson, Coalition for Community Schools: Do you think that it is because community schools are sometimes seen as only wrap-around services?

JD: I think that it is that, but I think that it is even more than that. It’s just that districts have a focus on how many community-based organizations they can get into the room and we don’t need to consider the teachers because we are not using teachers. They think that because teachers are not directly engaged and the services are not directly engaged in providing the programs- that they do not have to include them.

RF: Does that lead teachers and unions to be proactive....?

JD: Yes, we think so and we are working on that to increase the knowledge of our own local leaders and to provide them with some technical assistance and how to become engaged in these efforts that have up to now excluded them.
RJ: And how are you doing that Joan?

(4:40) JD: We have published a document, it’s called an issues brief, a leadership brief that encourages the locals to go to the district and to engage with them in how the union can be supportive. We give them examples of Cincinnati and Syracuse primarily but also New York City and how you can be helpful in making sure that the union is included and making sure that there is not an institutional block of participation. We have also taken lots of leadership to places to visit community schools. We have had the coalition people speak to our leadership groups. We have included community school workshops in our educational contract. We have published a magazine that was devoted to community schools and actually the coalition still uses it, as do we.

RF: What are some specific ways that unions can get involved with community schools or the community schools initiative?

JD: We see a number of different roles. The first role is that they can become conveners- they can bring people together, to talk about starting or expanding community school efforts in their community. That is one way they can become very proactive. (6:44) Secondly, to participate in ongoing efforts at the district level. They can support legislation that will encourage and incentivize districts to use community schools as a strategy for school improvement for example, they can encourage districts to use this strategy at the federal level for Title I improvement, they can be supportive, they can participate on oversight committees, they can educate their members as to community schools- “what are they,” “how are they helpful”- they can do community outreach and publish their own newsletters of success stories of community schools. So you are really talking about advocating and participating as ways that the union can be helpful in supporting and expanding the community schools movement.

(8:00) RF: Can you talk about how districts bring in so many outside resources, that it kind of pushes teachers out from the conversation. There has been a misconception that community schools free teachers from actually having to do their job. Is there a role for teachers in community schools and if so what would that role be?

JD: There are several roles for teachers in community schools. One of those roles of course is to work with the resource coordinator to make sure that what they are doing in after-school programs are connected to what the teachers are actually doing in the classroom. We have an academic alignment that can happen. You have teachers that actually participate in the program either by continuing an after-school program, by coordinating the tutoring and aligning it with the work in the school. They can participate in the community oversight of the program. They can include it in their discussion at leadership counsels, so that it is important for teachers to be there. The alignment we think is critical to the success, the bottom line is that if it does not improve achievement, if it does not improve the connection to the community, then it is not going to be successful. So we think that alignment is essential and the only way you get that is participation by the teachers. Now one of the things that we
think is brilliant about community schools is that it is not the teachers doing everything, it is really the teachers working with others so that we are all helping students, I think that is the real distinction here.

(10:40) RF: Joan, I’m kind of new to the whole community schools movement, but I know that your president Randi Weingarten came into her role really pushing community schools, maybe you can talk about the genesis of AFT’s involvement in community schools.

JD: Randi really has pushed the involvement. She sees the essential need for providing students in wrap-around services, providing students with ways in overcoming academic and non-academic barriers to learning. (11:24) She urges that kids can’t be successful if they can’t see the blackboard, they can’t be successful if they can’t see you, if they are hungry or afraid their learning takes a (hit). Providing those services to students is the only way we can guarantee their success. That’s why we think it’s important.

RJ: Tell us a bit about what is going on in West Virginia and New York.

JD: I cannot speak to West Virginia. I will have someone speak to you about that because that is an emerging project. I can tell you what the idea is, but you have to talk to them about details. But in New York it is an effort to expand services to students, and we talked about the union being a convener and that is what the union there is trying to do. They are investigating a number of different models, some that are already operating in the district, like the Children’s Aid Society, and some that are not yet operating this year like the Cincinnati model. Because New York is so large and diverse, the union there believes that there are a variety of models that will be successful depending on community needs, that we think is essential that the services offered be located in the community and provided by community-based organizations and are based on community needs. So that is what is happening in New York City.

(13:20) In the McDowell County goes well beyond the school, McDowell County is a partnership, they have now over 50 organizations, businesses and partners that are committed to looking not just at schools but at the economy of the county. It is a place where there is no housing for teachers, it is isolated, the connections to the outside world are really limited. Access to internet, for example, is totally limited and difficult to provide given the geography of McDowell County. In that instance, we are looking for not just wrap-around services which is of course what we are looking for, not just community schools, which is of course what we want to do, but looking at how we can provide economic improvement in this kind of county because we are convinced that without that, there is nothing that will be totally effective. You make improvements by millimeters but you will not turn the county around and we have to do that. The poverty is overwhelming, drug-use, gangs, violence- I mean it has everything. And so there is a focus that improves community schools but it is also beyond that.

(15:18) RJ: Are there any other examples of places around the country that you are working with, or that you know about where the union is taking an active role?

JD: Minneapolis wants to take a more active role, Miami is. We have several places in line to take on the more active union role, but most of our workers are very supportive. We have some places where the
mistake was made to not include the union and because with the delivered strategy, I cannot explain to you much more than that. Boston being my favorite example.

RF: What are some of the obstacles you have seen in creating community schools from union perspective?

JD: Money is always an obstacle. The competition for limited funds hurts community schools. Schools do not want give up any part of their money, community-based organizations don’t have any and the state and the federal government have limited resources that they are devoting to community schools. That is a big problem. I think the second big problem is, understanding what they are. We have for too long said that community schools are anything you want them to be and I don’t think we can do that anymore. I think that has been an obstacle, and I know the partners, the steering committee, is planning on dealing with it- that has to change. I think that lack of knowledge of how this can work, at both the district school-level and the community-based organizations, sometimes a lack of creativity, not being able to figure out how to get it done, and sometimes unwilling partners, they are doing it but they are not really doing it, and that can block everything, starting one and having it just go wrong for whatever reason, people want to avoid them because clearly they are not a good way to go. (18:16) We have an obligation to make sure that they stop right and they run right because bad examples become the reason not to do more. You also have a problem when a community school will say, “we are going to have an afternoon program and we are not going to pay the janitors,” “we are going to pay them at a different rate,” “we are going to bring other people to do the work and not working with the union to resolve the issue.” There are all kinds of small things that happen in community schools around the use of facilities, and get people crazy and get people fighting with each other. If you let those problems go unresolved then you have yet another bad example and people don’t want to do it. The lack of resources is a big one.

RF: What are some solutions to getting past these obstacles?

JD: The solution is to have everybody at the table from the beginning. That is one solution. The second solution is to look at what the resources that you need are and then together figure out how you bring those resources to there, and providing the kinds of services that you need. I think that is one of the strengths of the Cincinnati model. (19:58)It is not the dependent on district money, every part of funding is confined, what is house and safety money, what is department of justice, healthy union services, they look to different (vessels?) of successfully funding services, and all based on what the communities can provide and what the communities need. So we think that that model is a successful one. We also think that community schools really understand what we need for school improvement, we think that Title I funds can be used that way. We think that states ought to be providing funding to provide these services. A solution that we think are there or available or that can be fought for and the union can play a role in that. Our unions have a pretty good legislative program and they can be helpful in securing those kinds of resources.
RF: What advice would you give a union representative that wants to give their school a community school?

JD: We would go over what exactly it is they wanted to do to make sure that is what they want and need, we would help them convene people if there were no community schools in the district, we would help them get together the community-based organizations that provide services, we would help them get the district to the table, to get other community people, parents, and political people to the table to begin the conversations. In general the organizations in the community can be brought together and be built into a coalition to start and support these schools. We believe this, that if we educate our leadership as to the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of community schools, they can become influential leaders in the movement. You always have to have a supportive school district. You always have to have community-based organizations that are willing to step forward. We think that the union has a real role in that and that’s what we would have liked them to do.

RF: I want to say congratulations on your career and service. I know that you’re retiring.

JD: I am very soon.

RJ: What are some of the most important lessons you have learned from working with community schools?

JD: That there is hope, that no matter what the situation, if you work together, you can overcome just about everything. That you never give up.

RF: What do you see for the field over the next 5-10 years?

JD: I think it’s really going to expand. I think you are going to have growth in every urban district and every rural district in the country, just using this strategy as a way to provide the best they can for students.

RJ: Anything that we should have asked you that you would like to have us know about?

JD: I think that one of the things that we have to admit to is when you are trying to do a community school, you cannot let the contract be a block, that you have to figure out ways to get it done, that protects people, that gets people organized, etc. but that may require the union to tell teachers “you don’t own that classroom” and they have to be able to use it, and saying to janitors “you can’t do it on a different day.” And those are difficult, these are political leaders, they get reelected, they need people to vote for them. You tell the janitors and the president of the janitor’s union isn’t going to want to be president for very long. Figuring out how the union can make it work, looking at creative ways to solving the problems of when the contractor might come into play, I think is really important.

RF: Well thank you Joan, this has been more than enlightening. I know I appreciated it.
JD: I’m thankful that you called. I really think that this is important, when we first started this, (members of the MEA?) and AFT, while we were very supportive, we realized how much more the unions could be doing to support it with both our attitude and our attention.

RF: Why do you think that is, what changed over the years?

JD: I think that it has to do with coming to a realization and understanding that this wasn’t just an after-school tutoring class. The community schools were very much more than that. I think we took it too lightly initially. I think that there were very bad things happening in what were called community schools that put us off. The notion that we can’t make the district do community schools and then said “well, we can embarrass the district, we can have a meeting and if they don’t show up, we have all these people that are angry with them.” So there were a lot of things that we said, well we can and should be taking a much bigger role.

RJ: And we are seeing it happen, thank you Joan soo much.

JD: Ok guys, thanks very much.