THE GROWING CONVERGENCE OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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Appendix II: Lincoln Case Study—Expanding Learning Opportunities through Partnership

“This should be a staple of ESEA reauthorization. That’s the last piece to reforming America.”
- Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Steve Joel

Every Thursday, customers line up in front of a teller with their deposit slips in hand. Frequent depositors can earn special gifts, such as ice cream coupons—a way to keep patrons coming back.

But this bank is not your ordinary branch location in Lincoln, Nebraska. It’s the Huntington Elementary Branch of Liberty First Credit Union. The customers are elementary students who have received some basic financial literacy lessons with the help of the Nebraska Council on Economic Education. The tellers—grade 5 students—received special training from an employee of the credit union during an afterschool club; in fact, the credit union is one of many community partners involved in providing programs to Huntington students as part of the school’s Community Learning Center (Lincoln’s term for community schools). In just six months, over 80 students saved a total of almost $3,000, and 18 students were hired as junior tellers.

The banking program is just one example of how community schools can expand learning opportunities for students in ways that support the curriculum and build stronger connections between schools and their neighbors.

More than Child Care
For many years, Lincoln has offered out-of-school-time programs—afterschool programs and summer programs—provided by respected and established organizations such as the YMCA. But the community viewed the programs largely as child care programs without any connection to what was occurring during the school day. In addition, the afterschool staff had no idea as to which students might need support. Most afterschool programs merely provided time and space for students to complete their homework. Program providers marketed the programs as a way to keep students safe and occupied while their parents worked. Likewise, summer programs resembled day camps and did not necessarily align with the district’s learning goals.

But, when Lincoln began implementing its Community Learning Centers (CLC) initiative in 2000, leaders began to shift their perspective on the role of afterschool programs. They recognized that afterschool programs could support the overall mission of the schools while providing students with an engaging experience built around their interests. In fact, the school district does not operate a separate afterschool program. Instead, CLCs are the district’s strategy for providing learning opportunities outside the regular school day. “We have really tried to build on the strength and the capacity of existing providers in that area and work to connect those providers with the work of the CLCs,” says Lea Ann Johnson, director of Lincoln Community Learning Centers.

In turn, CLCs have enhanced the ongoing work of local afterschool program providers, says Barb Bettin, executive director of the YMCA of Lincoln, which was looking to expand its reach into inner-city neighborhoods at the time the CLCs were launching their initiative. In fact, the YMCA is now the lead agency at four schools. The YMCA’s board of directors and its volunteers welcomed the involvement of the CLCs, allowing the YMCA to fulfill its goals in the
areas of youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility. “The whole thing is real natural for us,” Bettin says.

The YMCA has even launched its own middle school in Lincoln, largely inspired by the CLC model, Bettin says. And at the 15 other schools where the YMCA runs afterschool programs, the services “mirror community learning centers” as much as is possible without a coordinator, she adds. “CLCs are the Cadillac approach,” she says. “Any time you can have someone there full-time dealing with the needs of the community and families, that's a plus. If all schools were CLCs, it would be great.”

Lincoln’s 10 lead agencies are community-based organizations that implement the CLC initiative at one or more schools. The organizations hire the site coordinator and bring “a diverse set of skills and capacities which are aligned with the overall vision and goals of the CLC initiative,” according to the Lincoln CLCs’ description. In an effort to meet the needs of students, site coordinators build relationships with school staff, families, neighborhood residents, and local providers. They develop partnerships that serve children and families, making sure that all services, such as expanded learning opportunities, are aligned with the mission and goals of the school.

**Deep Commitment to CLCs**

Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Steve Joel, Mayor Chris Beutler, and Barb Bartle, president of the Lincoln Community Foundation, make up the executive committee that leads the CLC initiative. By involving the school district, the city, and the foundation, the three-legged structure that makes up the executive committee keeps the initiative connected to the schools and to its community partners. When the initiative receives grants, “We are strategic in the decisions” about how the funds will be used, says Johnson. The strength of the initiative means that it has continued to grow through two changes in leadership in the mayor’s office and in the superintendent’s office.

Johnson’s position in the school district is supported by 21st CCLC funds. The school board recently approved funding that will support the CLCs’ leaders and an office manager and consultants as 21st CCLC are phased out. The eventual goal is to eliminate leadership positions’ dependence solely on grant funds. Johnson reports to all three members of the executive committee and, as former associate director for Family Service Lincoln—one of the CLCs’ lead agencies—she has been instrumental in building trust between community partners and the schools.

“Lea Ann really represented the community organizations’ voice and served as a confidence builder because she was one of them,” says Jeff Cole, associate vice president of school-community partnerships at the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and network lead for the Nebraska Community Learning Center Network. “She has really worked over the years to show that the district did value the partners and wasn’t trying to take over.”

Along with the YMCA and Family Service Lincoln, nine community agencies serve as lead partners at the 18 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, and one high school that are CLCs. The
representatives of the agencies serve on a leadership council, which also includes university officials, city council and school board members, business leaders, and local funders.

Local control is a high priority in Nebraska. The state is one of only five that has not adopted the Common Core State Standards, and it has not enacted charter school legislation. Further, unlike their counterparts in many states, Nebraska lawmakers have not moved to tie student achievement scores to teachers’ performance evaluations. Therefore, CLCs are not an attempt to “fix” failing schools. “We think the schools do a good job, but they can’t do it alone,” says Cole, who is also working to replicate Lincoln’s successful structure for bringing partners into the schools in other areas of the state.

Instead, CLCs provide a strategy for removing barriers to learning, creating expanded learning opportunities, and addressing other needs typically associated with low-income families. In addition to expanded learning programs, Lincoln’s CLCs offer a summer food program, send food home with in-need families on weekends, and offer the RestWise tenant education program for parents living in subsidized housing. Twelve sites provide behavioral health services. Other CLCs offer parenting classes, family literacy programs, tax preparation assistance, and green space projects.

“This is a university town. We are an all-American community. But when you get into our impoverished areas, we have the same problems they have in DC,” says Joel. “If it were not for CLCs, we wouldn’t have an 84 percent on-time graduation rate. I recognize that if America wants to mitigate the ravaging impacts of poverty, then we have to minimize the time that kids spend in terrible environments and maximize the time they spend in nurturing environments like CLCs. Our community gets this, too. Quite frankly this should be a staple of ESEA reauthorization.”

**District-Level Infrastructure**

The close match between the district’s goals for students and the expanded learning opportunities provided through CLCs begins with the infrastructure of the district office and helps explain why CLCs are helping students succeed. Part of this infrastructure includes action teams made up of principals, neighborhood and agency representatives, parents, and community members who focus on specific topics across the district, such as student learning, family engagement, or communications.

To monitor the quality of the CLCs, a local evaluator uses a site observation tool to collect data in a variety of areas, such as program administration and how staff members interact with families and partners. Use of the evaluation tool is limited only to programs delivered through the CLCs. The local evaluator also conducts an evaluation on an annual basis.

With the advent of CLCs, the district expected out-of-school-time programs to have what Lincoln Public Schools Director of Curriculum and Instruction Jadi Miller calls “a more academic bent.” In response, the administration created a CLC curriculum specialist position, held by Kathie Phillips. Phillips served as a school-community coordinator at one of the first four CLCs before moving into the 25-hour-a-week district position. Her role is to reinforce how community schools can use after school hours to support what teachers provide during the school
day while giving students extra attention as needed. She also conducts observations at CLCs, monitors development in out-of-school-time policy across the country, and provides professional development for CLC staff on topics such as project-based learning or thematic instruction.

Opportunities for Alignment
The curriculum specialist position also allows for stronger connections between what happens in the classroom and how after-school programs are able to take the content further. This year, Phillips became part of the curriculum council, which is made up of the district’s 10 content-specific curriculum specialists. The group meets twice monthly to discuss topics that affect all subject areas, such as assessment.

“It just seemed incredibly logical to me as we connect those dots between day and extended day,” Miller says, adding that the district’s disappointing performance on the first statewide science assessment is a curriculum area that the CLCs’ expanded learning programs are addressing. Kirsten Smith, the district’s science curriculum specialist, met with all the CLC coordinators to talk about learning challenges and to provide guidance on science lessons for children.

“What a perfect place for the CLCs to be an excellent partner,” Miller adds

Graduate students attending the University of Nebraska now run science clubs in elementary school CLCs, helping to nurture students’ excitement for science through hands-on lessons. In partnership with 4-H, several schools also offer Lego robotics clubs as well as STEM-related opportunities in “GIS/GPS geocaching” and filmmaking and photography.

Whether the opportunities focus on science, language arts, mathematics, or any other subject, Phillips makes sure that expanded learning aligns with the district’s respective standards before implementing a particular program in the after-school hours. The district is also underscoring its emphasis on analyses of student data in order to focus instruction and to identify “power standards”—those essential goals that students must meet in their grade level. Expanded learning programs will target the same goals.

“This is an exciting challenge. We’ve never been there before,” Phillips says. “We have finite minutes and finite resources and we have to be strategic.”

Throughout the year, regularly scheduled professional development keeps partners involved in expanded learning opportunities—even if they work at non-CLC schools. Professional development opportunities allow the YMCA and other after-school providers to learn best practices from CLCs and implement them at other schools where they run programs. Sometimes, providers at those other schools ask to borrow materials, such as microscopes, from a CLC resource room, indicating that they want to take their after-school programs “to another level,” Phillips says. “We’re always open to letting those materials go out the door.”

School-level Infrastructure
Lincoln Public Schools currently encompasses 25 CLCs. All of them are Title I schools, except for the two middle schools and the high school. At those 3 schools, however, at least 40 percent
of students still qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. For Miller, the CLCs are at 25 levels of implementation, but she adds, “They are all on an upward journey. We are raising the bar on our expectations, and they are meeting those.”

While each CLC demonstrates unique features and depends on particular partnerships, all the CLCs share some common features. In fact, Joel notes that the difference between expanded learning programs at CLCs and those at other schools is that they are part of a framework. “They have a rubric,” he says.

Each school operates with a school neighborhood advisory committee (SNAC) that includes the principal, the CLC supervisor, parents, local residents, and service providers. The SNAC advises as to the opportunities and programs members would like to introduce into in the school. While the principal and coordinator ultimately make the decisions about which partners to include as part of the CLCs, the SNAC provides considerable input.

The coordinator also helps make sure that expanded learning opportunities and other services provided through the CLC align with the school improvement plan. At Arnold Elementary, for example, Dayna Kranawitter—an employee of the Lincoln Housing Authority, the CLC’s lead agency—is a member of the school improvement committee, which includes teachers from each grade level. The committee reviews student data and focuses on “how we can use expanded learning opportunities to move kids along,” Kranawitter says. And, at Huntington, lead teachers from the expanded learning programs in the CLC attend grade-level meetings to make sure that their lessons and activities focus on what students need to be learning.

“Therein lies the difference between afterschool and the CLC,” says the YMCA’s Bettin. “The coordinator can make those connections. What is so great about the CLC is that it’s almost like an extra school staff person, interacting with teachers and the principal. They truly understand first-hand the goals and objectives of the school program.” Bettin’s staff members also benefit from well-designed training as well as from networking opportunities, which allow them to develop professionally and continually adjust their programs to students’ needs and curriculum goals.

**Dinosaurs, Dogs, and Digital Photography**

Many of the community agencies provided before- and after-school services before the advent of CLCs and therefore still charge fees for families using the program five days a week. However, the agencies offer scholarships for high-need families and accept Child Care Block Grant funds for eligible families. In addition, clubs and enrichment activities—such as Huntington’s bank teller club—are available for free to students (they are covered by 21st CCLC funds). Opportunities emerge from students’ interests, academic needs, and the variety of experiences partners are able to provide. Sometimes, partners receive grants to organize a particular clubs.

Arnold’s Brain Boosters club targets underperforming students who have been referred by their classroom teachers for extra academic support. Other clubs range from a hand-bell choir and a dinosaur club to digital photography and even a fishing club (the school is located across the street from a lake). A Youth Ambassadors group gives students a chance to interact with elected officials, learn about their community, and develop leadership skills. While the clubs operate on
a first-come, first-served basis, part of Kranawitter’s job is to help identify students who have not yet had the opportunity to participate.

One of Huntington’s partners is a local resident with a therapy dog—a Labrador retriever named Barney—who is the star participant in a Mutt-i-grees club. The curriculum, which was created by the Pet Savers Foundation, Yale University School of the 21st Century, and the Cesar Millan Foundation, teaches social-emotional skills while promoting animal welfare. Rik Devney, Huntington’s principal, says that the program has been a good fit for students with “moderate to low-level” behavior problems, and teachers are seeing improvement in social skills in the classroom—demonstrating that alignment with the school day means not only focusing on academic performance but also helping students overcome obstacles that stand in the way of success.

Middle school CLCs face the added challenge that many of their students could go home instead of remaining at school for additional learning and enrichment time. Accordingly, the CLC supervisor “looks for staff that really wants to be there” and works to make the afterschool opportunities as engaging as possible, says Kelly Schrad, principal at Lefler Middle School. In addition to receiving tutoring support, students may try their hand at archery, martial arts, or the STEM-focused Roads, Rails and Race Cars club, created by the Mid-America Transportation Center and funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Engineering students from the University of Nebraska work with classroom teachers to lead the STEM-focused afterschool club. Lefler’s CLC coordinator also communicates regularly with teachers to make sure the expanded learning programs align with each month’s goals for students in core subject areas. “There’s been a total shift in the conversation,” Schrad says.

The intentional focus on alignment is yielding higher scores on the Nebraska state assessment. Since 2009, the percentage of 3rd, 5th, and 8th graders meeting or exceeding standards in reading has been steadily climbing. CLC students who attend expanded learning opportunities also consistently outperform those who do not attend those programs, according to district data.

District leaders are also more likely to turn first to CLCs when they want to pilot a program or provide an additional learning opportunity; they recognize that the CLC structure allows for smooth implementation. In addition to the organizations that were already providing afterschool programs, a variety of arts groups, STEM-related organizations, and other providers now seek out ways to partner with CLCs, reinforcing the difference between afterschool or other expanded learning programs at community schools and those at traditional schools.

In Lincoln, a peer tutoring program called “Learning Together” demonstrates how district leaders have chosen community schools over traditional schools. The program brings together struggling students with other students who are two grade levels below them—such as 4th graders tutoring 2nd graders and 8th graders assisting 6th graders. Now held at seven CLCs after school, the program provides students with additional reading support and creates leadership opportunities for the older tutors.

“The district said, ‘We believe in Learning Together, but we don’t know where we’re going to fit it in,’” Johnson says. She also saw Learning Together as an additional opportunity to strengthen
the connections between schools’ teaching staff and the staff of youth development organizations. In addition to training certified teachers to lead the tutoring groups, the partner agencies involve their employees in the program. “I don’t believe that youth development workers always get high-quality professional development. Limited time and partner resources often make professional development difficult to provide. When we offer opportunities community-wide and systemically, it supports their efforts,” Johnson says.

**Expanded Learning during the Summer**

At CLCs, the strong connections that have developed between afterschool partners and the instructional staff during the school year continue over the summer. At Huntington Elementary, for example, the school and its partners offer a 10-week summer camp that, in the morning, focuses on academics, especially reading, and is led by certified teachers. About 100 students attend the camp, representing about 35 percent of the school’s enrollment, with all of the requests for program participation filled. The Family Service Association, the school’s lead agency, keeps the program running until 6:00 p.m.—providing activities that support what the students worked on in the morning but also blending in field trips and other enrichment opportunities. When possible, staff members from partner agencies spend time in the classrooms in the morning both to support the classroom teachers and to improve their skills in classroom management.

Lefler Middle offers a two-week summer camp for incoming 6th graders, paid for through 21st CCLC funds, to help them make a smooth transition to middle school and build their leadership skills. Last year, the program targeted Lefler’s lowest socioeconomic feeder schools but was later opened up to more families to help fill the enrollment. Creating a diverse mix during the summer, Schrad says, helps eliminate the barriers among students who enter middle school from different elementary schools.

**Funding and Other Challenges**

The greatest challenge faced by most community school initiatives is how to secure ongoing funding. In addition to 21st CCLC grant funds, CLCs receive financial support from the United Way, their partner organizations, private foundations, and Title I.

With grant funds gradually declining, however, Superintendent Joel and other city leaders have been working on plans to sustain the community school initiative. Joel said that he would like to place a tax referendum on the local ballot to support CLCs, but such an approach is not politically feasible. Still, from his statewide perspective, Cole believes that a “public sector financing option” is still a possibility, even as CLC leaders continue to work with existing funders to create a plan for sustainability. With about “a year of life left” with current funding sources, Joel says he could be forced to dip into the teachers’ contract to maintain the level of services currently provided by CLCs. He said that, even though teachers are strong supporters of CLCs, such a move might test their loyalty.

“Sustainability is always an issue and always will be an issue,” says Cole, but he adds that Lincoln’s CLCs are funded and led by the entities noted above, indicating that the initiative is not dependent on any one sector for all of its funding. He contrasts this balanced approach to a community outside Lincoln whose community schools are entirely dependent on 21st CCLC
funds. When the money runs out, the community will not have the option of turning to a diversified funding stream.

Sometimes the variation in finances and programming across various lead agencies can be an issue. The district would like to see greater consistency in the prioritization of academics by partners. Joel says he would like to see a similar programmatic approach used at all the CLCs—“homework first and then activities.”

Johnson says that her role is not to “dictate” how CLCs structure their activities. “They need to offer services that meet the needs of the students based on the school improvement plan,” she says. Her role is to develop collaborative partnerships that ensure achievement of the community school initiative’s goals.

Another issue is whether some coordinators are stretched too thin. Five of them are responsible for two sites each, possibly preventing those CLCs from reaching their full potential. “It would be a golden nugget if we had enough resources to have a full-time coordinator in every CLC,” Devney at Huntington said. “When you’re sharing those leadership roles, you’re managing a program. But when you have a full-time leader, you are leading a program.”

Johnson does not believe that the CLCs that share a coordinator are short-changed as long as the coordinator works closely with the principal and community. “Coordinators that lead multiple sites must be experts at building relationships, creating trust, and casting the vision that many can get behind. “When they manage, it is very different than when they lead,” states Johnson.

What the Future Holds
Lincoln CLCs are clearly setting a model for the rest of the state in demonstrating how afterschool program providers and community schools can work in close partnership to help students succeed, Cole says. He added that the next step is to focus on early-childhood education to help eliminate the learning gaps often exhibited by young children even before they enter kindergarten. Some community school initiatives across the country have made preschool a strong component of their work with local partners.

Cole expects the Lincoln community’s support for CLCs to continue to grow, especially as the data begin to show the effectiveness of the program. “I think they [Lincoln Public Schools] are in a position to explain the impact” of CLCs, he said. He also expects parents to become more active participants in the future of CLCs. “Parents have emerged as big supporters, and I would envision that leg [parents] becoming stronger and more vocal,” Cole says. “They are an underutilized resource.”

What a Difference CLCs Make
Traditional afterschool programs still exist in Lincoln, but they largely resemble what schools offered before the advent of CLCs—safe and engaging activities but with few connections to what teachers are trying to achieve in the classroom. Non-CLCs may also offer summer programs, but they are “not necessarily linked and connected and aligned” with the school day, Johnson says.
While a long-term study has yet to investigate how Lincoln students in expanded learning programs at CLCs perform compared to other students, Johnson is beginning to collect the evidence. “We have data that is showing that when students and youth are involved in high-quality out-of-school-time programs, they do better on state assessments,” she says.

But personal stories matter, too. Miller uses her own children’s experience to illustrate the comparison between traditional schools and CLCs. She says that, while she was “lucky enough” to be the principal at two CLCs, her two teenage boys attended schools that were not CLCs. “Nothing was missing from their educational experience,” she says. “They were in a place that was safe, but it was just the minimum. They got their homework done, but it was nowhere near the comprehensive extended learning opportunity.”

Lessons Learned
Lincoln’s experience in expanding learning opportunities through community schools provides examples for other school districts, community school leaders, and program providers.

First, universities can be strong community school partners in providing expanded learning opportunities. They offer expertise in important content areas such as mathematics and science. At the same time, college students earn valuable experience in school settings.

Second, trust is essential in creating strong partnerships between community school leaders and community-based program providers. In Lincoln, Johnson has earned the trust of community agencies because she worked in one of them prior to working at the school district office. An atmosphere of trust, however, must also develop at the local level among site coordinators, program providers, school staff, and families.

Third, the involvement of an executive committee that represents the city, the school district, and the community keeps Lincoln’s CLC initiative connected to all three of those entities. This structure has helped guide the transition from traditional afterschool care to a well-designed CLC initiative that is aligned with the district’s goals.

Finally, opening professional development opportunities to all providers—even if the providers do not work in community schools—helps expand best practices to other sites. It also increases providers’ understanding of how to work in partnership with classroom teachers to focus on students’ learning goals.