Data show that students who regularly participated in Multnomah County SUN Community School activities showed strong gains in academics, attendance, and behavioral improvement. For example, in 2008–09, 75 percent of students increased their state benchmark scores in reading and 77 percent in mathematics; the average daily school attendance was 95 percent, and 74 percent of students had a more positive attitude toward school.

Results suggest that SUN students with high rates of participation in after-school activities significantly outperform comparison students in school attendance and credits earned toward graduation.

For more, visit http://web.multco.us/sun/results

---

In a culturally rich region of the country such as Multnomah County, Oregon, SUN Community Schools have quickly earned the support of a variety of civic and political leaders and have crafted an effective strategy for removing obstacles to children's educational success. Already working with young children and their families as part of the SUN Service System, SUN Community Schools recently started addressing school transitions in the early years. This is providing SUN another way to prepare children for school and to connect with families in order to make them aware of what community schools can offer.

**Reaching a New Population**

When Child Care Resource and Referral of Multnomah County began offering CPR and child safety classes to local childcare providers, it noticed a significant turnout among Burmese immigrants. Because of the language barrier, however, participants benefited little from the training. In response, Brooke Chilton Timmons from lead agency Metropolitan Family Service and supervisor of six community schools that are part of the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) Service System, arranged for a class not only offered in Burmese but also held at Parklane Elementary School, a SUN Community School site closer to the neighborhoods where many Burmese residents live. “This is a population that the schools have been trying to reach,” Timmons says. “Many of the Burmese families are not well connected with the school buildings and so we welcome any chance to provide an opportunity for them to be involved.” The experience shows how SUN Community Schools are working to address the needs of Multnomah County’s young children and to reach families in culturally responsive ways.
The SUN Service System: Overcoming Battles

Founded in 1998, SUN is a thriving system of community schools and supportive services in six school districts across Multnomah County, including the Portland Public Schools. The county, with financial support from the city of Portland, serves as the “managing partner” or intermediary in a cross-community, cross-jurisdictional partnership.

In fall 2011, the network of community schools grew from 60 to 64—a testament, leaders say, to the widespread and stable political support that SUN has garnered among members of the Multnomah County Commission, city leaders, and superintendents. At a June 2011 meeting of SUN’s 17-member Coordinating Council, participants discussed ways to thank the commissioners for their continued support—perhaps through public comments at a commission meeting or through a public relations effort.

However, county leaders have not always demonstrated unwavering dedication to the SUN model. In 2006, when the county faced a budget crisis, a few commissioners questioned whether the county’s investment in SUN schools was prudent. The commissioners’ assertion enraged community members and provoked over 500 people to demonstrate outside the county offices. “We had people [lined up] here around the building because they couldn’t get into the budget meeting.” The room was packed, recalls Gloria Wiggins, division manager for Catholic Charities, El Programa Hispano, and a representative of the Coalition of Communities of Color, an advocacy organization heavily involved in making sure the SUN Service System provides services tailored to Multnomah’s diverse ethnic groups.

Now, SUN is “politically bulletproof,” says Bill Scott, a business leader and co-chair of the Coordinating Council. “The popularity with the county has been tested.” Lolenzo Poe, a Coordinating Council member and a Portland Public Schools official who was involved in the early development of community schools, notes that politicians do not run for office without voicing their support for SUN. With the battle for public support won, SUN focuses on building a replicable community schools model that involves several community agencies and addresses the needs of the area’s diverse population.

Early Development of Community Schools

Portland and Multnomah leaders became interested in community schools in the late 1990s as a way to respond to a variety of challenges, including higher academic expectations, school budget cuts, and the region’s growing racial and ethnic diversity.

Many elements of what later would become the SUN Service System already existed, such as an emerging after-school programming initiative led by City Commissioner Jim Francesconi, Multnomah County’s funding of an array of social services targeted to youth, a county community-building initiative,
health clinics and other providers delivering services in the schools, and the Parks and Recreation Department operating what it called “community schools.” But these initiatives were not coordinated.

Community leaders began researching existing models of coordination, including the Children’s Aid Society, which in the late 1990s operated several community schools in New York City. Drawing on city and county general funds, they decided to develop a full-service community school model in eight schools. A youth advisory board came up with the name Schools Uniting Neighborhoods–SUN Community Schools.

Development of a formal School-Age Policy Framework followed in 2003, which “solidified some things, such as having services held in schools,” says Diana Hall, SUN program supervisor. The policy created a system for the delivery of social and support services that lead to educational success and self-sufficiency for children, families, and community members. The SUN Service System built on SUN Community Schools and identified community schools as its cornerstone strategy.

The SUN Service System also recognized that it was also important to work with the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) and other culturally specific social service organizations in order to respond to the county’s rapidly changing demographic composition, including an influx of Asian immigrants. Today, the county’s Hispanic community is seeing the most growth, but Lee Po Cha, family services director for IRCO, says that SUN creates a bridge between schools and families. “We’ve realized the strength of the model is the whole idea of partnership,” he says. “You can’t expect one SUN site coordinator do to a miracle.”

A Diverse Mix of Partners

Oversight and management of SUN is provided by the Coordinating Council, made up of members who represent the county, the city of Portland, participating school districts, the state of Oregon, funders, and business and community agencies. The intermediary, the SUN Service System in the Department of County Human Services, supports the council (see Figure 3).

The involvement of a diverse set of partners on the council recast the impression, Scott says, of SUN as merely a county initiative. “It shifted the feeling of SUN to being much more of a sense of joint ownership,” adds Joanne Fuller, the other co-chair of the council and Multnomah County’s chief operating officer. She says that the council “creates a lot of people with investment in what is happening.”

In addition, eight nonprofits and one government agency operate as lead agencies for SUN sites, including Portland Parks and Recreation, Metropolitan Family Service, Catholic Charities, Self Enhancement, Inc., and IRCO. SUN intentionally invited culturally specific organizations already working in schools to become lead agencies. SUN’s goal was to deepen the organizations’ connection to community schools and to build on the needs and assets of each school community. Lead agencies and partners support students and families through, for example, after-school programming, parenting classes, transition programs, life skills development, and more.

At each lead agency, a supervisor oversees a handful of SUN Community School sites. The supervisors are responsible for training and supporting site managers, handling budgets for individual SUN Community Schools, conducting surveys of families, and monitoring participation and program performance through a database called ServicePoint.

The variety of agencies involved means SUN sites can have a unique feel, depending on the competencies of the agency running the sites and the needs of a particular community. Through collaboration, however, SUN Community Schools are able to meet

Selected Members of the Early Childhood Council of Multnomah County

- Multnomah County Library
- Multnomah County Health Department
- Children’s Institute
- Multnomah County Department of County Human Services, SUN Service System
- Multnomah Education Service District
- Child Care Resource & Referral of Multnomah County
- Commission on Children, Families and Community
- Portland Public Schools
Figure 3: The SUN Coordinating Council: A Diverse Mix of Partners

SUN Service System

Organizational Structure

Coordinating Council

SUN Service System Division, Multnomah County Dept. of County Human Services

Initiatives
- Early Childhood & Community Schools Linkage Project
- Healthy Active Schools
- SUN Hunger Relief

Sponsoring Partners

Anti-Poverty Services
Social & Support Services for Educational Success
SUN Community Schools
Parent-Child Development Services
Services for Sexual Minority Youth
Alcohol, Tobacco & Other Drug Services

Community Based Organizations

School-based and school-linked services delivered countywide across six regions and six school districts

Rev. 4/20/11
needs they would not otherwise be able to address. For example, Portland Parks and Recreation ran a community schools program that predated the SUN Service System; not surprisingly, the program primarily provided recreation activities. “Prior to SUN, we didn’t have the social service piece. We didn’t have the connections,” says Mary Richardson, a supervisor with Parks and Recreation. “By partnering together, there is a lot of information coming together that we wouldn’t have on our own.”

Multiple School Districts

Hall says the SUN system is enhanced by its reach. It serves six of the county’s eight school districts, allowing district administrators and site managers to learn from each other’s successes and missteps.

Karen Gray, superintendent of the 3,600-student Parkrose School District in northeast Portland, served as superintendent of a district on the Oregon coast before assuming her current post four years ago. Parkrose currently has two SUN schools—Parkrose High School, supervised by Portland Parks and Recreation, and Shaver Elementary, supervised by Metropolitan Family Service. When Gray arrived, she did not even know what SUN stood for, but she now knows she would never want to work in a district without community schools. “I want all my schools to be SUN schools,” she says. “It connects the community to the school and the school to the community.”

Linking the Early Years with Schools

The connection between SUN and Multnomah County’s child care, Head Start, and preschool providers is growing stronger under the Linkages Project, a three-year initiative of the Coalition for Community Schools that is funded by a $225,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Linkages is an effort to connect early childhood education work with strong community schools initiatives for three purposes: to enhance the quality of early childhood learning opportunities, to facilitate transitions between early childhood and school, and to ensure that services for children and families will continue as children progress through the grades. Multnomah County is one of three Linkages sites; the others are Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

For two reasons, Multnomah County was a logical participant in Linkages. First, it has developed a strong community schools structure, and, second, many lead agencies were already providing services for young children or families with young children under the SUN Service System. Various social service agencies in the county have long offered the Parent Child Development Services (PCDS) program, which uses the Parents as Teachers model and includes both a home-visiting component and playgroups to teach parents about key child development milestones while providing children under age 5 with a social environment in which to interact. Many of the groups have shifted from meeting in community locations to meeting in SUN schools, giving parents—many of them low-income—a reason to get acquainted with the school their child may eventually attend and to take advantage of additional opportunities to help their children learn. “It is not an afterthought,” says Julie Houston, director of early childhood and family services for Impact Northwest, a social service agency and one of SUN’s lead agencies. She adds that even parents with infants are asked, “What school will your child go to?”

Linkages has also made Portland one of three sites in the country chosen for a professional development grant connected to “Mind in the Making,” a book and videos that focus on how children learn essential “life skills.” Ellen Galinsky at the Families and Work Institute developed the materials, which offer another opportunity to bridge gaps between early childhood educators and primary grade teachers, says May Cha, who leads SUN’s early childhood work.

Working Harder To Reach Immigrant Families

Culturally specific Parent Child Development Services groups also reach out to families in their own languages. Alder Elementary School in the Reynolds School District, for example, hosts a playgroup of West African parents. Mothers work on their conversational English in order to grow more comfortable communicating with their children’s teachers. A group of Latino families also meets at the school.

Many immigrant families’ view of early childhood development or school readiness differs from that of American parents, says Lee Po Cha at IRCO. For example, given that reading to children is not a
common tradition among many groups, home visits are especially valuable, Lee Po Cha notes. “The PCDS model works perfect for this population because we go to them,” he says, adding that school-based playgroups help “remove some of those barriers” between families and schools.

Superintendents of the SUN districts also recognize the important role played by SUN programs in connecting parents to schools. “Our SUN Community Schools are making a critical difference not only in the lives of students but also parents,” Don Grotting, superintendent of the David Douglas School District said recently during a SUN study visit leadership panel held for visitors from Albuquerque.

By reaching out to different cultural groups, SUN leaders have also realized that they need to exercise care about the terms they use. “Kindergarten round-up,” referring to practices to get prospective students and their families acquainted and registered with their new elementary school, “…that doesn’t make any sense to them,” Chilton Timmons told the Coordinating Council. SUN is attentive to the language it uses with different groups.

The Linkages Project has also fostered increased collaboration among members of the county’s Early Childhood Council, a volunteer committee representing programs and agencies that serve 0–8 children (see text box on page 37). “The Early Childhood Council has been meeting for many years. The Linkages table created a new place for early childhood and school-age professionals to work together,” says Peggy Samolinski, SUN program manager, who has been serving on the council since well before the advent of Linkages.

Now, council members such as Renea Arnold, early childhood services supervisor for the Multnomah County Library, is thinking about ways to use SUN schools to make books available to more young children and to provide a parenting class on reading to children. And Elana Emlen, who works with the Multnomah Education Service District, said that using SUN sites to make parents aware of a new 0–8 wellness initiative called Project LAUNCH “makes a lot of sense.”

SUN’s Support of Early Learning

Building on the success of the Parent Child Development Services program, SUN coordinators are now devoting even greater attention to early childhood issues as a consequence of Linkages. SUN currently has two official Linkages sites—Parklane Elementary School in the Centennial School District and Woodmere Elementary School in the Portland Public Schools—but Linkages is producing impacts across the county. Each Linkages school has established a kindergarten transition team that includes principals, site managers, parents, kindergarten teachers, and representatives of the early childhood community. Each team is responsible for strengthening the transition into elementary school for all young children.

Linkages has placed special emphasis on providing children without preschool experience with a taste of school during the summer before their kindergarten year. Using a transition strategy started by Portland Public Schools with Title I funds and expanded through Linkages, both Parklane and Woodmere offer summer transition programs that introduce children and their parents to the school environment, promote social and emotional skill building, and foster enthusiasm among children and parents for the “big school.”

The success of the summer transition programs has motivated officials across the school districts in Multnomah County to spread the model to several other schools. Portland Public Schools decided to introduce transition programs into three other elementary schools in summer 2011. In the Centennial District, leaders decided to expand the program beyond Parklane to all four of its community schools.

SUN staff estimate that only 64 percent of children eligible for Head Start have placements in Head Start. It is difficult to determine whether the other 36 percent or those not eligible for Head Start participate in formal early childhood experiences. Organizers of the transition programs are using Head Start waiting lists to find children most in need of a summer transition program. They also advertise the programs through the non-profit Child Care Resource & Referral of Multnomah County, the Parent Child Development Services groups, and early childhood special education programs, said Cha, who leads the Linkages Project for SUN.

Even though Alder Elementary in the Reynolds District is not a Linkages site, the school’s kindergarten teachers saw the need to institute a summer program for incoming kindergartners. After lobbying school and district administrators, they launched a program in summer 2011 and taught the summer...
classes, which are funded with Title I funds and emphasize social skills and parent engagement. “We want to really create that bond so when they come back all the faces aren’t brand new,” says Vice-Principal Denise McBride, adding that she can “almost guarantee” the children attending will not have had any experiences with out-of-home care. “They have a lack of interaction with adults who are not [in their] family.” Principal Paz Ramos wishes his school provided even more early learning opportunities. “Our goal is to have a pre-K,” he says, but he does not know how it would be funded. “We have to figure out how can we collaborate with our partners.”

**Plans for Another Early Childhood Demonstration**

A seamless path between early childhood education and the early grades is the vision of a demonstration project at Earl Boyles Elementary, a SUN Community School in the David Douglas School District. Still in the early stages of planning, the school-based early learning program is an initiative of the Children’s Institute, a well-known statewide advocacy organization, and could be “a good practical place to show what SUN would be like for children 0 to 5,” says Molly Day, the institute’s early learning initiative director. As a SUN Community School, Boyles was a logical choice for the demonstration, but Day stated at a recent meeting of the Early Childhood Council that efforts to create such a program without the support of a community school might not succeed.

While she is encouraged by initiatives such as the Earl Boyles demonstration and SUN’s Linkages, Samolinski says that she is careful about the creation of 0–8 strategies that do not lend themselves to replication elsewhere. “For some of our school communities, it’s already a strong focus,” Samolinski says. “But we’re trying to build it into the conversation for all.”

The potential of the Linkages Project also lies not just in opening community schools to younger children but also in reaching out to community-based Head Start and childcare programs, says Cha. She asks, “How do we start engaging early childhood providers to see community schools as a resource and vice versa?”

**Barriers to Collaboration**

Members of the Early Childhood Council acknowledge that they would like to see more interaction with Head Start, which is the only publicly funded preschool program available in the county. However, collaboration with the federal program has been a struggle because the four Head Start grantees do not participate on the Early Childhood Council or in other community-wide discussions about early childhood. In the Parkrose School District, Head Start classes meet in district buildings no longer used as schools, and the parents of a Head Start preschooler typically do not visit Shaver Elementary, the local SUN Community School, to facilitate transition. “We try to have meetings with Head Start teachers and our kindergarten teachers at the end of the school year, but it’s hard,” says Cindy Bartman, Shaver’s principal.

Head Start, however, has long stood as a model of parent involvement and leadership. In fact, Kim Dunn, a former Head Start parent and member of the Early Childhood Council admitted that, when her child started kindergarten, she missed the support and opportunities offered by Head Start. “We both felt out of place,” she says. In fact, some national experts suggest that Title I schools could improve their efforts to engage parents by following the example set by Head Start through its informal “listen and learn” sessions in which parents, community members, and school staff meet to discuss strengths and ways to improve partnerships. Strengthening relationships with families across the 0–8 age span, specifically for children entering Title I schools, is the goal of the new National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, funded by the Office of Head Start.

Another barrier to strengthening the ties between families with young children and SUN community schools is that after-school programs—frequently a family’s first experience with a community school—often are not open to kindergarten children, and sometimes not even to first graders. While SUN is certainly not the only community schools initiative that does not make programs available to young children, the absence of early childhood offerings can create the perception that community schools serve only older students or offer only after-school classes. May Cha has worked to increase awareness about early childhood issues and programs among SUN site managers and surveyed them to determine their understanding of the need for services for young children, particu-
larly kindergartners. The survey showed that kindergartners were almost always welcome at family events and could receive the same social services as older children. At the same time, an inventory of extended-day programming showed that, even the schools that opened after-school classes to kindergartners, often did so only once or twice a week or had to cut back because of a lack of staff.

Clearly, with limited financial resources, community schools are often unable to fund adults in the numbers needed to provide appropriate supervision for younger children. In addition, some providers say that extended-day programs make the school day too long for 5-year-olds while others note the challenges involved in providing activities that meet the needs of students across a K–5 or K–8 age range. Supporting expanded learning opportunities for young children is a complex problem that SUN and its partners are addressing as they increasingly focus on early childhood learning. “We have to make strategic decisions about serving younger kids,” says Frances Hall, a SUN site supervisor with Neighborhood House, a social service agency. “We don’t have the space to run two programs [for younger students and older students].”

**Focusing on Early Chronic Absenteeism**

Even with those obstacles, however, SUN has brought light to an issue that is unifying both the early childhood community and school districts across Multnomah County. Under the Linkages Project, schools, early childhood providers, and parents are starting to recognize the harmful effects of absenteeism in the early grades and how it can undermine children’s ability to read by third grade. Research on early chronic absenteeism was first released in 2008 by Hedy N. Chang, a researcher and writer, and Mariajose Romero, now an associate professor at LaGuardia Community College in New York. The study, “Present, Engaged and Accounted For,” presented national data showing that more than 11 percent of kindergartners and close to 9 percent of first graders are chronically absent—missing 10 percent or more of the school year. In schools serving poor children, the percentages are probably higher, the report said.

Since the report’s release, the Coalition for Community Schools has been educating those involved in local community schools about absenteeism—an issue that is important for parents to understand before their young children start school but that also matters deeply to K–12 educators. Absenteeism is also a major concern of the Linkages Project.

In Multnomah County in November 2010, SUN invited representatives of the six SUN districts were invited to attend a workshop on early chronic absenteeism. Participants learned that one in four county students was chronically absent in grades K–3. In kindergarten, the rate was even higher, with one in three children missing at least 10 percent of the academic year. Over 100 people attended the workshop, with a similar turnout at a second gathering in March 2010.

The workshop has inspired all six SUN districts to increase their focus on addressing early chronic absence in a number of ways. Districts now regularly share data with central office staff, principals, teachers, and families; they have revised their attendance tracking systems to reflect chronic absence measures; they are addressing the transition to kindergarten as a way to reduce chronic absence; they have created attendance teams and attendance clubs; they check in on chronically absent student by, for example, calling students’ homes and picking up chronically absent students; and they communicate with parents, often through home visits, about the importance of attendance.

The SUN Community Schools initiative is providing additional support to combat absenteeism. It has printed colorful brochures on early chronic absenteeism for placement in main school offices, in childcare centers, and in other places frequented by parents with young children. Site managers note that they provide families with information on absenteeism through various venues such as through the Parent Child Development Services groups or during the summer transition classes for new kindergartners. “We can do early prevention on absenteeism,” says Moe Yonamine, the SUN site manager at Alder.

**Using Data for Planning and Evaluation**

SUN has leveraged early chronic absence data to raise the importance of early childhood across the county. All six SUN school districts now focus on early chronic absenteeism as a key indicator of progress, and use school district–level absenteeism data in SUN’s annual evaluation efforts. Absenteeism is one of the topics termed a “critical issue area.” Absenteeism
data are fed back to individual schools in spreadsheet reports that show participation levels in various programs and how those compare to academic or other goals of the school.

SUN uses several tools and mechanisms to gather data to evaluate success and drive program development and initiative planning. At the site level, data on client demographics and participation, as well as data on program characteristics, are entered into ServicePoint, a database used by SUN to capture data and outcomes across several programs and initiatives, including community schools.

SUN surveys teachers to determine their impact on interim academic indicators and youth assets. SUN then compiles and analyzes the survey results and provides the results to lead agencies and individual schools. The results permit each school to see what teachers have to say about areas such as homework completion, student behavior, attitudes toward learning, and attendance.

SUN also surveys students about their experiences in after-school programs, asking whether there is someone who can help them with homework and whether they feel that there is an adult who cares about them.

Recently, the county’s internal evaluator used data from ServicePoint and school districts to develop a better understanding of whether participation in SUN services leads to higher academic achievement. The study compared outcomes for high school students participating in SUN community school services during the 2008–09 year with those for a group of students in the same schools who did not participate in SUN. The results showed that students in SUN programs had higher attendance rates and earned more credits toward graduation but did not score higher on standardized tests. (For more results see text box “Selected Results from SUN.”)

Staff recognize that ServicePoint is limited for use in community schools evaluations. The database is not only cumbersome for site management purposes, but it also does not “talk” to school district, county health department, or mental health databases. At the same time, SUN leaders would eventually like to have the capacity to conduct a longitudinal study of K–12 children in order to explore the long-term impact of attending a community school.

**Maintaining Continuity into the Primary Grades**

For now, schools such as Alder and other elementary schools provide some examples of how community schools can build on work that begins in the early years to communicate with parents about their children’s regular attendance at school.

Prior to 2011, Alder had already been offering summer school for children entering the first through fifth grades. Children in the primary grades participated in enrichment programs while children in the higher grades received more academically focused work to improve their performance in the fall. In summer 2011, however, Alder changed the arrangement such that younger students received the more concentrated academic help. “We have a lot of little kids who aren’t where we need them to be,” says McBride.

In addition, after-school classes at Alder include culturally specific activity groups in which students enjoy snacks, draw, or work on their homework. One class serves K–4 students and their Karen-speaking mothers, many of whom came from refugee camps. Karen speakers are an isolated ethnic group within the Burmese culture. A case-worker from the Asian Family Center, part of IRCO, conducts weekly home visits with the families and communicates with the children’s teachers about their school work. Another after-school group serves Pacific Islanders.

Alder is also the site of one of six SUN emergency food pantries supported by the Oregon Food Bank, which serves families year round, including through the summer. The shelves in a conference room adjacent to the front office hold the overflow of canned goods while the SUN office stocks two refrigerators with meat and fresh produce, something families often do not receive in an emergency food box.

Alder is Oregon’s first “Dreamer” school selected by the I Have a Dream Foundation. The foundation will provide students with support and resources to help them meet or exceed expectations on benchmark tests in the hope that 80 percent will earn a post-secondary degree or certificate funded by the foundation. Many of the goals of the Dreamer model overlap with the goals of community schools, including collaboration with education and non-education partners and “attending to the birth-through-college-completion continuum.” When deciding from among a pool of
finalists on which school to adopt, the foundation considered only SUN schools, Samolinski says.

**Taking Advantage of Opportunities**

Its highly regarded position in the county is helping SUN connect with initiatives aimed at helping students succeed from their earliest years through their transition to adulthood. Such initiatives include a new Cradle-to-Career partnership, Portland Mayor Sam Adams’s strategic plan, and Governor John Kitzhaber’s plans to reorganize early childhood funding.

**Cradle-to-Career Partnership**

SUN leaders are working to connect with the new Cradle-to-Career (C2C) Partnership. Launched in 2010, C2C is a broad coalition of government, education, business, and community leaders throughout Multnomah County that plans to monitor key indicators of student success, issue reports to the public, and hold programs accountable for results. C2C was the culmination of two earlier initiatives with similar goals—the Leader’s Roundtable and the Education Cabinet, formed by the Portland mayor’s office and the county chair to address high school completion. It is also a local adaptation of the Strive Partnership, a broad effort active in Cincinnati to involve community leaders in helping children succeed at all stages.

The C2C initiative, housed in a new organization called All Hands Raised (formerly the Portland Schools Foundation), intends to create “collaboratives” to work on “strategic priorities,” such as making sure that students are prepared for kindergarten or improving high school graduation rates. Dan Ryan, director of All Hands Raised, describes C2C as a “structured approach to cross-collaboration.” “It’s about breaking down the silos,” he says. “It’s in that isolation that we’ve built some really bad habits.”

SUN leaders, many of whom also sit on the C2C Council, see community schools and the SUN Service System as a core strategy for C2C—not just one of many youth-oriented programs or a collaborative of after-school program providers. For them, community schools are the vehicle or strategy for delivering services from the prenatal period through students’ transitions after high school and beyond.

“How do we hone our message so we get SUN nested into C2C?” Scott asked at the SUN Coordinating Council meeting. SUN has recently applied to serve as a “collaborative” (a structure that C2C hopes to create to address certain priorities) to address two of C2C’s three priorities: eliminating disparities among children and ensuring youth success, and linking community and family supports to children and youth success.

All Hands Raised and SUN have successfully cooperated to deliver a summer program ensuring a successful transition from eighth to ninth grade. In fact, with SUN schools already offering summer programs, All Hands Raised went to SUN with the 9th Grade Counts initiative, which provides opportunities for students to earn credit before starting high school. “We went deep with 9th Grade Counts,” says Nate Waas-Shull, director of community engagement for All Hands Raised. “We couldn’t do it without SUN. It was a crucial vehicle to push through this bold initiative.”

Ryan notes, however, that partners questioned whether students would attend SUN sites during the summer. Although several SUN partners offer summer programs, Ryan noted that SUN is sometimes viewed as a “closed system” by providers or agencies that do not have a contract with SUN. Nonetheless, the lines of communication between C2C and SUN are open—a step toward answering leaders’ questions about how the two initiatives align. Key members of the SUN Service System Coordinating Council, including superintendents, are on the C2C Steering Committee and the broader C2C Council, and Waas-Shull is a member of the SUN Coordinating Council. Diana Hall adds that C2C’s role of holding the community accountable is important. “They are a promise of a new table where the leaders won’t just admire the data, but do something about it,” she says.

**The Mayor’s Portland Plan**

The SUN Service System expects to play a critical role in advancing the Portland Plan, Mayor Adams’s strategic planning process for the next 25 years. The plan, for example, sets forth education goals, such as “strengthening schools as community centers.” According to the plan, by 2035, “school facilities will serve students, families and neighbors as gathering places for community events, learning opportunities and recreation,” and “neighborhood schools will offer appropriate wrap-around community services, before- and after-school programs, parental engagement, and lifelong learning opportunities for all
community members.” The draft plan also proposes the concept of “20-minute neighborhoods” in which residents will be able to reach non-work amenities and services, including schools, within a 20-minute walk. “[The Mayor] sees that there needs to be a continuum of supports,” said Kali Thorne Ladd, the mayor’s education strategies director, a member of the SUN Coordinating Council, and a former SUN site manager. “He sees SUN as the vehicle for schools to be open to the community.”

The Governor’s Plans for Early Childhood

A proposed reorganization of Oregon’s funding for early childhood programs is another factor that could affect how programs for young children are delivered as part of the SUN Service System. Governor Kitzhaber’s plans for early childhood programming call for pooling the various funding sources that currently support disadvantaged young children and distributing those funds on a per-child basis to meet eligible children’s health, social, and educational needs. SUN leaders want to make sure they are in tandem with the governor’s plans, however they develop.

Another proposal involves identifying children by their school attendance zones. SUN co-chair Joanne Fuller, who served on the state’s Early Learning Design Team, sees the link between children and their neighborhood as an important step in realizing the potential of community schools. In fact, such a linkage is reflected in the SUN Service System’s rental assistance for low-income families, the purpose of which is to help stabilize families so that children can reap the benefits of remaining in the same school, Fuller stressed. “If you’ve got a school that is really thinking about the whole family, they create seamlessness for when [the children] do enter school,” Fuller says. “They are showing families what SUN Community Schools can offer.”

Every School a SUN Community School

An Every School a SUN Community School initiative launched near the end of 2010 as an effort to make the proven SUN model available to more children across the county. “The way to create consistency is if all schools are SUN schools,” as long as reaching children in poverty is still the standard for deciding how the system grows, Fuller says. The Every School initiative is involving the business community in directly funding community schools—an annual cost of about $95,000 per school that covers the site manager, supervision from an agency, some programming, and supplies.

One obstacle, Diana Hall says, is that Portland is “foundation poor.” The philanthropic community is not a significant source for expanding the SUN system. Another barrier is that, even if the system expands to include additional sites, county funding and the pool of social services for needy families will not necessarily grow commensurately. “We would be spreading the same amount of social service resources over more schools,” Samolinski says.

In addition, the availability of supplemental funding for SUN Community Schools is not spread equally across the county. In 2002, Portland voters approved the Portland Children’s Levy and then, in 2008, approved it for an additional five years. The levy funds eight SUN Community Schools and early childhood services, including Parent Child Development Services groups and mental health services. But the levy cannot fund SUN schools outside the Portland city limits, even as poverty rates rise beyond the boundary into the eastern part of the county.

Still, district leaders say that SUN schools can do more for families than if they were not community schools. “SUN is the most powerful united effort between principals and others to align extended services and improve student outcomes,” Portland Public Schools Superintendent Carole Smith said at the meeting of the Albuquerque visitors. “This is critical now with the limited resources we have.”

Lessons

LESSON 1: Well-implemented community school structures, strategies, and activities garner credibility for schools and create opportunities for partnerships with the early childhood community, governments, and other agencies and organizations. Community schools provide a platform for launching additional initiatives and strategies as demonstrated by the Linkages Project, Children’s Institute Early Learning Initiative, I Have a Dream Foundation’s work, and the Cradle-to-Career Partnership. These initiatives purposefully selected SUN community schools and associated nodes of activity. Their best chances of success depend on a respected strategy that uses partners as resources.
LESSON 2: When schools and the early childhood community build bridges and collaborate, they are able to address challenges and identify solutions. For example, focusing on an issue that is relevant to both early childhood educators and elementary schools—such as early chronic absenteeism—provides a vehicle for increasing communication between and among sectors, potentially leading to significant progress.

LESSON 3: Building robust partnerships with community organizations, especially culturally specific social service organizations, can allow community schools to reach families with services that providers could not otherwise deliver. Likewise, partner organizations make their services available to families at a convenient location—the community school.

LESSON 4: A community-wide collaborative leadership group that includes school district leaders, community partners, government officials, and the early childhood community can help set a strong vision for the community and sustain new strategies, such as for early childhood programming, into its broader goals for children and families.

LESSON 5: Keeping the lines of communication open between community school leaders and those involved in what could be considered “competing” initiatives can avert turf wars and keep everyone focused on the goal of helping children and families succeed.

LESSON 6: A summer transition program for children entering a community school and their families helps children and parents acclimate to the school environment. It promotes social and emotional skill building, fosters enthusiasm among children and parents as children prepare to enter “big school,” and connects to resources available at the community school. More than just co-locating a transition program within a school building, the programs are integral to and supported by school and community partners.