

OurChildren®

A photograph of two young girls in winter clothing, smiling and sitting in the snow. The girl on the left is wearing a purple and blue jacket with a patterned scarf. The girl on the right is wearing a red jacket and black gloves. They are both looking towards the camera with bright, happy expressions.

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Community
Schools Lead
to Student
Success

Make Physical
Activity a
Family Priority

Stories of How Former
Victims of Bullies Triumphed

Correcting Behavior
Without Criticism



Community Schools:

Engaging Parents and Families

a warm, inviting, and supportive place for families. Through its strategic partnerships to support child and family well-being, Howe Elementary is better equipped to improve student performance. Howe Elementary is a community school.

What is a community school?

Walk into a community school and you immediately recognize that it's a special place. That's because it is more than a school, as we traditionally think of one—it is also a set of deliberate partnerships that provide the supports and opportunities that are important to students, families, and the surrounding community. Community partners can include health and social service agencies, family support groups, institutions of higher education, youth development organizations, government, community groups, and others—but they all are organized around a common goal: to create the conditions necessary for all children to learn at their best.

Community schools are open all day, every day, evenings, weekends, and summers. They are centers of the community that strengthen families and communities, so that they can contribute more effectively to student learning and development. Community schools ground learning in the community's conditions and challenges, as using students' life experiences to generate excitement about learning.

In its recent report, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools* (www.communityschools.org/mtdhomepage.html), the Coalition for Community Schools

by Olga Heifets and Martin Blank

The day starts at 6:30 a.m. at Howe Elementary School in Green Bay, Wisconsin. In the Howe Family Resource Center next door, parents sign their children in, catching a glimpse of the day's activities. Throughout the day Urban 4-H, YMCA of Green Bay, Head Start, and local businesses offer an array of services and opportunities. Informal events like themed monthly dinner nights planned and staffed by the school's parent-teacher group help build trusting relationships. Observes parent Cheryl Micolichek, "Everyone's working as a team here to do what's best for this child."

"There's a whole world of programs and resources out there that we are tying together," says Chris Dunbar, director of the Family Resource Center. With 86 percent of Howe's students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals, and 40 percent English-as-a-second language (ESL) learners, supporting families is critical to the success of students. "Howe works under a systems model," says Principal Ed Dorff. "If we don't connect with families directly, we won't be able to address those issues that really matter in their lives, including elevating education to a top priority."

Community members, the parent-teacher group, school, resource center, and partner agency staff work to make the school

demonstrates the positive impact of community schools on students, families, schools, and communities. It identifies five conditions for learning that community schools seek to fulfill:

- The school has a strong core instructional program with qualified teachers.
- Students are motivated and engaged in learning.
- The basic physical, mental, and emotional health needs of students and families are addressed.
- There is mutual respect and effective collaboration with parents and families.
- Positive community engagement promotes a safe, supportive school climate.

Intentional partnerships focused on family involvement and student success are at the heart of the community schools' approach. This integrated approach to learning aligns well with National PTA's core values of integrity, inclusion, respect, commitment, creation of community, and accountability. It also creates reciprocal relationships among schools, families, and partner organizations that directly impact student learning.

Building on family strengths

Community schools recognize that all families have strengths. James Otis Elementary, an East Boston community school where 88 percent of the students are ESL learners, provides a full-time program coordinator who speaks Portuguese, Spanish, and English through its lead community partner, the Boston Excels Program. "Fifty percent of the phone calls I get from parents are for Mara [the coordinator]," says Principal Tom Connelly. "They don't have fear with her and are clearly more comfortable telling her what they're concerned with."

"We have to consider cultural differences," Susan Klaw, director of Boston Excels notes. "Families are a true asset, and you need to provide a number of ways for them to participate in their children's education." Through programs like the school's weekly parent breakfasts where families come together to learn about school operations, immigration laws, and home buying, parents have come to see the school as an important resource to themselves and the community. By offering a number of entry points for parents, Otis helps them become greater advocates for their children and the school.

Working with families to meet basic needs

Working with partners, community schools provide services that build productive, flexible, respectful relationships with families while freeing principals and teachers to focus on learning. Lorainne Edwards, the Communities In Schools (CIS) site coordinator at East Elementary School in rural King's Mountain, North Carolina, reflects, "We try to help families overcome their personal obstacles, because when they see that we're concerned, they are more willing to be involved in the school."

The school's parent-teacher group has served as a gateway for participation for many of East's disengaged families. In providing information on site-based CIS resources and services, as well as updates on school events, East's parent-teacher group has increased parent involvement significantly. Services through this community school include adult education classes, an emergency food and clothing closet, corporate support for eye exams and glasses, and a nearby health clinic. Parents now spearhead improvement projects and serve in multiple leadership roles, whether with the parent-teacher group, or other school activities like the school's active Boy and Girl Scouts or food drives.

Building a community of learners

Involving parents and families in their own learning helps parents reinforce their children's work in school. To accomplish this, community schools create adult education opportunities. This creates a community of learners, and can improve teacher attitudes toward students and families.

Chicago's Marquette Elementary School enrolls 2,100 students, nearly all poor and minority. Through its partnerships with Metropolitan Family Services and other organizations, it offers ESL, GED, citizenship, and computer classes as well as parenting classes in English and Spanish. Principal Paul O'Toole explains, "When kids see parents reading a newspaper or a book, it makes it easier for them to acquire those reading skills; parents do better when they understand how schools work and how they can help their kids succeed. Our partners help make this happen."

Lessons for PTAs

By deliberately engaging their families, community schools like Howe, East, and Otis are making a difference in the lives of their students and families. These schools, along with their partners, are acting on the knowledge that family support and parent engage-



**“Walk into a
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Is your school a community school? Tell us about it. Send a letter to the editor.

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ment go hand-in-hand with student success. What lessons can local PTAs learn to enable student success?

- 1. Leadership is essential to creating a school culture where families matter.** PTAs can exercise that leadership, creating the expectations for—and occasionally prodding and cajoling—schools to function in ways that develop respectful and supportive relationships with families.

- 2. Partnering with community agencies, where parents can both receive services and volunteer, supports families and children and builds trust.** PTAs can encourage and help establish strategic partnerships that focus on getting better results for students and families.
- 3. Increasing parent and family participation requires listening to and acknowledging their voices.** PTAs working with community partners and the school can help to organize opportunities for hearing the hopes and aspirations of parents for the education of their children and their own lives. This could mean facilitating home visits, doing personal outreach, or designing parent-led programs.

PTAs can consider working with their schools to leverage community partnerships in a systematic way around the needs of their families, creating lifelong learning opportunities for all. "People here want parents to be involved," Jennifer Baker, a community school parent reflects. "This makes you feel that everyone is equal." **OC**

Olga Heifets is the research associate, and Martin Blank is the staff director of the Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. Visit www.communityschools.org for information about the coalition, or e-mail the authors at heifetso@iel.org and blankm@iel.org, respectively.

Teacher Appreciation Week



Visit National PTA's website at www.pta.org/taw for help planning Teacher Appreciation Week events. You'll find

- ✍ **A Planning Schedule:** From January through the week of the observance, this detailed schedule will help you plan everything from promotions to parties.
- ✍ **Ideas File:** Dozens of ways to say thank you to current and former teachers. Includes suggestions from PTAs around the country.
- ✍ **Public Relations Samples:** Use the press release, letter to the editor, and municipal proclamation to promote your event.
- ✍ **A Certificate of Appreciation:** Download certificates to present to teachers.
- ✍ **An Event Script:** Modify this speech to thank teachers and staff formally at your celebration.

National PTA's website has plenty of other materials, too, for honoring teachers not only during Teacher Appreciation Week, but all year long. Visit www.pta.org/taw today to start planning ways to pay tribute to these important people in children's lives: teachers!

Say thank you to your child's teachers! Celebrate National PTA's Teacher Appreciation Week May 2-8, 2004