



January 2012 Newsletter Feature

The Crucial Role of Teachers and Teachers Unions in Community Schools

The community schools movement is growing, and with it, the involvement and support of teachers, paraprofessionals, and their unions. National teacher unions have always been strong supporters of the community school strategy, the two largest – the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers are both original partners in the Coalition for Community Schools. Now, local union affiliates are increasingly getting involved in community school initiatives.

Implementing a community school initiative requires ways of thinking and acting that are different from traditional schools. In addition to forging strong partnerships, educators must make important decisions about scheduling, personnel, and instruction. With the shared leadership structure of a community school, it behooves teachers and their unions to be involved in those decision-making processes, according to [union leaders we spoke with](#).

“The bottom line is community schools do not improve student achievement alone. The only way you get that is participation from teachers,” said Joan Devlin, Senior Associate Director at the [American Federation of Teachers](#).

Devlin, a Coalition Steering Committee member since 1997 who is soon retiring, has been pushing teachers as essential partners in community school initiatives for more than two decades.

The Coalition, in partnership with the Center for American Progress will release a report this month that argues that districts, unions, and other key stakeholders must share ownership and work collaboratively to build strong community schools.

An involved union can help community partners understand issues from their members’ perspective and assist teachers and other staff in crafting mutually satisfactory solutions, according to Devlin.

How and Why Unions Get Involved

Teachers unions play a critical role in setting district-wide school reform goals and implementing them at school sites.

Participating unions have gotten involved in community schools because they are convinced that services, supports, and enrichment activities support teachers inside the classroom, make the curriculum more relevant and engaging, and create the conditions for learning that enable children to succeed. Union participation in community school initiatives gives teachers a voice in the initiative; builds teacher buy-in; facilitates contracts and a culture that support community schools; strengthens classroom instruction; and, demonstrates the positive role of unions in school reform.

What Union Participation Looks Like

Unions at the community and school levels bring a number of assets to a community school initiative. They help align partnerships with classroom instruction, bring tremendous political leverage, and help identify resources.





In **Syracuse**, [Say Yes to Education Inc.](#) rolled out its district-wide community school model in partnership with the school district and the local union. Kevin Ahern, President of the Syracuse Teachers Association sits on the initiative's operations board and community groups.

"We really have to recognize that our schools are going to be a product of all of us working together," Ahern said.

In **Cincinnati**, the superintendent, school board president, and union president work together to maximize the impact of the Cincinnati Public Schools' [Community Learning Centers \(CLCs\)](#).

"The resources are already out in the community. . .if the resource came to the school where the children are, then it makes it easier," said Julie Sellers, President of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers in describing the benefits of CLCs.

In **Evansville, Ind.**, the Evansville Teachers Association (ETA) is a strong partner with the district and is a member of the community school steering committee as well as the community-wide "Big Table."

ETA president Keith Gambill, works with the district to ensure that teachers' voices are heard by all community partners. Part of his role, as he describes it, is to "get information from teachers on what students need and get the community partners wrapped around those needs."

In all these cases, and in all community schools, oversight and implementation of a community school initiative are the shared responsibility of all key stakeholders.

National Union Leaders Support Community Schools

National leaders from the AFT and NEA have recognized the community schools approach as one of the most effective models of reform.

"I think (unions) are coming to the realization that community schools aren't just an afterschool tutoring class," Devlin said. "We can and should be taking a bigger role in this."

The AFT and NEA share a view of public education that is supportive of community schools. "Schools must be the centers of our communities, a safe haven where children can receive the services they need to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on academic achievement," said President Randi Weingarten during her 2008 inauguration speech, making community schools a central part of the AFT agenda. The AFT has reinforced this position by making community schools a key element of their ESEA reauthorization platform and core to their work.

As a way of educating members about community schools, AFT has published leadership briefs detailing how its members can engage their districts in community school initiatives.

AFT is also spearheading an [initiative in McDowell County, West Virginia schools](#) that provides an array of wraparound services to combat the effects of devastating poverty. A host of partners have signed on





to the five-year pilot initiative, including Blue Cross Blue Shield, IBM, Save The Children, housing specialists, utility companies, and community colleges.

Community schools are a focal point in NEA's vision for reform as well.

NEA's [Priority School Campaign](#) links its NEA members with parents, principals, and community organizations to improve student achievement in some of the lowest performing schools around the country. Among the five elements of change that guide the Campaign are leveraging community "wrap around" services and developing family and community partnerships; these are important principles in all community schools.

"Teachers and support professionals know that students deserve the best in their classrooms... To do well in school, students need good nutrition, dental and medical services, and counseling programs so they are ready to learn when they enter school and every day thereafter," NEA President Dennis Van Roekel said in supporting the community schools approach.

Community schools in [Portland, Ore.](#), [Lincoln, Neb.](#), and Evansville are among those included in the Priority Schools Campaign's recently released [Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0](#) guidebook.

"We're really supportive of the whole wrap-around concept for the student and that's where I think community schools are a good selling point," said Phil McLaurin, Director of External Partnerships and Advocacy at NEA.

The future of union involvement in community schools

The unions' connections to teachers make them critical partners in achieving results for children. Consequently more community school initiatives are including unions as part of their planning, oversight, and implementation teams.

For their part, unions are also beginning to serve as the impetus for new community school initiatives. For example, some are arranging tours of community schools to get a first-hand look at community school programs in action. The [New York City United Federation of Teachers recently sent a delegation to Oyster Community Learning Center](#), part of Cincinnati's community school initiative, to study the school's successful school-based health program. They are considering how to make the community school strategy a key piece of their school reform efforts in New York.

Devlin said she is encouraged by recent efforts to include unions and examples of unions taking the lead on community school initiatives. She sees a future where every district and its union partners capitalize on the community school strategy.

"The solution," Devlin offers, "is to have everyone at the table together from the beginning."





How can you and your unions strengthen partnerships?

- Reach out to your local union president and invite him or her to partner in your community-wide leadership group
- Include the union representative on school site councils
- Work with teachers, find out their needs, and help them see how community schools can help them do their job
- Tap union networks to serve as “covenanters” in a new community school initiative

Resources

- Coalition’s website: [Your Leadership Role - Unions](#)
- [AFT’s Community Schools Website](#)
- [NEA’s Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0](#) Guidebook
- Article: [New York Teachers Union Visits Cincinnati Community School](#)
- [Surrounded By Support \(AFT Summer 2009 Magazine dedicated to community schools\)](#)
- [Community Based Learning: Engaging Students for Success and Citizenship](#)

