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Spring 2008



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INSPIRATION FOR YMCA
VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

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YMCA Community Schools bring the assets of an entire community to bear in preparing children and families for success.

BY SARA ROBERTSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BARNES

Beyond THE BASICS

In December 2007,

just 11 days before Christmas, a fire ripped through an illegal garage apartment in Long Beach, Calif., taking the lives of three sisters, ages six, seven and 10. The girls were all students at Whittier Elementary School—part of the YMCA Community School Program in Long Beach.

Immediately after the fire, the **YMCA of Greater Long Beach** sent a social worker to the hospital to assist the family with grief counseling and

launched a neighborhood-wide effort to aid the family financially, physically and emotionally.

“The fire was a terrible community tragedy, but because Whittier was a YMCA Community School, our Y helped the community cope via counseling, crisis intervention and direct fundraising to help bury those three children,” says Bob Cabeza, Executive Director of the YMCA of Greater Long Beach’s Downtown Community Development Branch. “Whittier didn’t

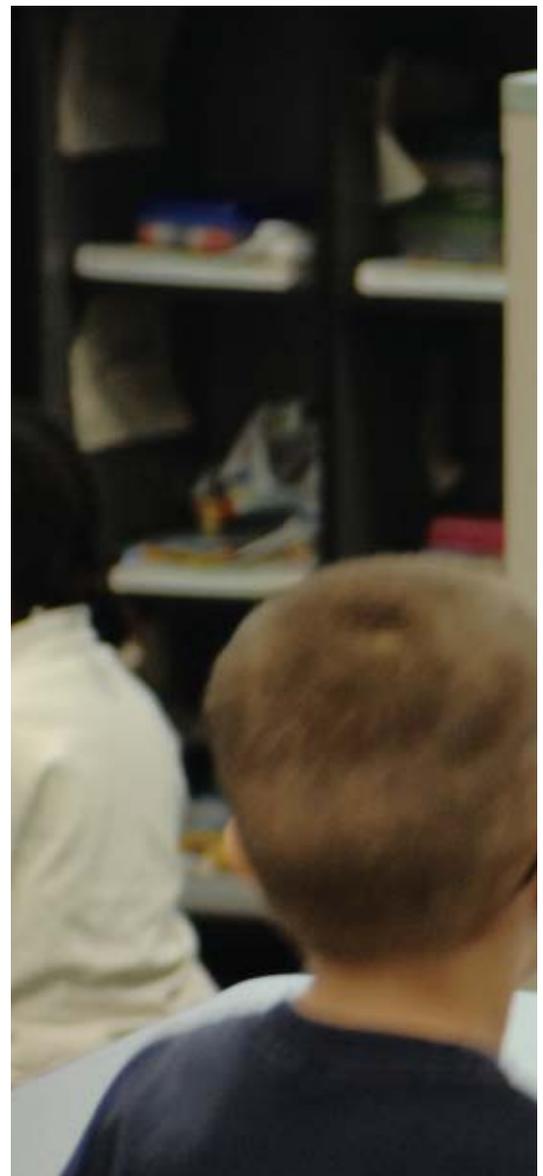
only see these three children as part of the school’s family, they saw them as the YMCA’s family, too.”

In short, that’s the goal of a Community School—to provide a network of support designed to remove obstacles from learning and become an extension of a student’s family.

A Community School is both a physical place and a set of partnerships among a public school and other community resources, like the YMCA. Its integrated focus on health and social



Inside a first-grade classroom at the Riverview East Community Learning Center in Cincinnati, Ohio



services, academics, youth and community development and engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. In fact, the goal is for schools to act as community centers that are open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings and weekends.

“Community Schools are designed to create purposeful partnerships between schools and community organizations in order to get better results for kids,” says Marty Blank, Director of the Coalition for Community Schools. The coalition, which is part of the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) in

Washington, D.C., is an alliance of local, state and federal organizations working toward stronger schools and stronger education.

“[The goal is] to improve the lives of young people, the lives of their families and the overall health and well-being of the community,” he adds.

Given the YMCA’s long history as a community-based organization, the Community School effort can be a natural collaboration for Ys looking to respond to educational needs in their areas beyond after school programs. “The Y is poised to step forward as the best-equipped organization to

help the Community School effort,” says Blank.

A New Way of Thinking

Nationally, the Coalition for Community Schools effort is focused on getting schools and neighborhoods to co-exist. “We like to think of the Community School effort not as a program but as a way of thinking about how our schools and communities need to work together,” Blank says.

And that is where the YMCA can play a direct role.

“The YMCAs bring expertise and assets that schools don’t always have,”



Left: First-grade teacher Edwina DuBose works with two students. Right: Patrice Tiggs, a YMCA Resource Coordinator, gives a student a high five.

says Blank, highlighting the Y's expertise in youth development, leadership development and family engagement.

"It's not that Ys aren't in schools already, but too often people I talk to would characterize those relationships as landlord/tenant, not partnerships," Blank adds. The goal of a YMCA-led Community School, he says, is to form a deep, truly seamless relationship between the school and the YMCA, and where the communication is open, and there is a clear understanding of roles and mutual respect for the expertise at the table. It's a relationship that can be much more complex

than other school initiatives where the YMCA may play more of a subcontractor role.

Today there are more than 100 YMCA-led Community Schools across the country. These schools bring significant "extras" to the table, whether they are teaching parents advocacy and leadership skills so they can make a positive change in their communities or providing students with academic support. The schools also reach out to connect teachers with parents, who often live in different communities, so they can better understand the needs of students.

"YMCAs have a big role to play in helping schools understand what's going on in at-risk communities and how to help schools respond," Cabeza says.

Advocating for Change

The first YMCA Community School in the country, the Stevenson YMCA Community School (SYCS), was created in Long Beach 10 years ago. Today the YMCA of Greater Long Beach has 10 after school programs in the downtown and Long Beach communities that are built around family involvement and community leadership, Cabeza says.

In Long Beach, the primary goal of



Teenagers arrive at the Riverview East Community Learning Center.

the Community School program has been to get traditionally under-involved parents active in their children's schools. "A lot of low-income parents in our school district were afraid to get involved and didn't know what their rights were as far as advocating for their children's education," Cabeza says. "And in a lot of our urban schools with immigrant or new communities, there isn't a history of parent-led institutions like the PTA."

Cabeza also wants the YMCA of Greater Long Beach to be an equal partner in bringing something tangible and beneficial to the children and the parents at the school sites. "We want to change the atmosphere so parents no longer feel shut out," he says.

Before the SYCS began, there was actually a line in front of the school that parents weren't allowed to cross, Cabeza says. But today, after 10 years of work in the Long Beach School District, parents seem to feel more connected to their school and neighborhood than ever before. A Parent Center within the SYCS provides them with resources and assistance. Parents use it to discuss community and school-related issues.

In addition, over the past year, the YMCA of Greater Long Beach Downtown Community Development Branch has offered 500 parent classes educating more than 2,000 parents on everything from how to navigate the school system to couple's counseling. "We didn't design this program with a one-school site mentality. We really

had a vision of changing institutions," adds Cabeza.

And within the Long Beach community, the role of the YMCA has been altered as well. "What the Community School program has done for us as a Y is that it has brought the school district to the table as an equal partner," adds Cabeza. "They really value our YMCA, and they really value the quality of the work that we do. They know that when we go in and develop strong parent partnerships with the schools that the children's [academic assessment] scores and grades go up."

For example, according to report card and benchmark results from the SYCS during the 2005-2006 academic year, the social skills and work habits of SYCS students versus non-involved students were significantly higher while

(Continued on page 10)

NUMBER CRUNCH

CHILDREN OF COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS IN CINCINNATI, OHIO, HAVE IMPROVED IN SEVERAL AREAS, SUCH AS:

Asset Category	CincyAfterSchool/Community Learning Center Participant	US Average (2003 Average Search Institute)
Planning and Decision-Making Practice	83%	29%
Creative Activities	74%	21%
Enjoyment of Learning and Bonding with School	86%	52%
Achievement Expectation and Motivation	94%	65%

Five Conditions for Community Schools

Community School advocates believe the emphasis solely on academics, as exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act, is too narrow an approach to public education. Instead, they say schools must work *together* within their communities to fulfill the five conditions necessary for a child to succeed. These conditions include:

1. THE SCHOOL HAS A CORE instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.

2. STUDENTS ARE MOTIVATED and engaged in learning—both in school and in community settings—during and after school.



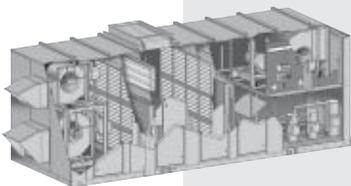
5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, together with school efforts, promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive and respectful, and connects students to a broader learning community.

3. THE BASIC PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.

4. THERE IS MUTUAL RESPECT and effective collaboration among parents, families and school staff.



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absences were significantly lower at the .05 level or better. Non-fiction test scores and effort grades were somewhat higher as well, approaching significance at .10 or better.

Impressive Results

In Cincinnati, Ohio, the Cincinnati Public School District and the **YMCA of Greater Cincinnati** are in the second year of a four-year pilot program working with nine Community Schools, also known as Community Learning Centers. With a \$1 billion tax-funded plan to renovate all of the city's public schools, the goal is to eventually turn every school in the city into a Community School.

Since the pilot program began, the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati staff and their partnering agencies have conducted pre- and post-tests to measure the impact of the Community School programs on students' developmental assets. Developmental assets are benchmarks for positive child and adolescent growth developed along with the Search Institute (www.search-institute.org). For

the last four years, the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati has benchmarked its Community School results against national averages. So far, the numbers have been impressive, says Rebecca Kelley, District Vice President of the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati.

While typical American youth report 19 or fewer developmental assets—out of a total of 40—Kelley says Cincinnati's Community Schools are seeing averages as high as 33 developmental assets per student. (See "Number Crunch" on p. 8 for more information.)

"We have been very intentional about increasing the number of assets for the kids in the program," Kelley says. "And we feel really, really good about this."

At Cincinnati's Oyler Community Learning Center, Patti Bellamo, a parent, volunteer and full-time cook, has also noticed significant developments since its pilot program began two years ago. In fact, before Oyler became a Community School, its attendance rate hovered around 88 percent. Today, it's 93.31 percent. "I think the children feel

safe within the building, and they want to be at school," says Bellamo. "And their self esteem seems to be much higher this year than it has been in the past."

What's also on the rise is enrollment. According to principal Craig D. Hockenberry, during the 2004-2005 school year, 541 students were enrolled at Oyler. During the 2006-2007 school year, that number jumped to between 860 and 880. And afterschool attendance has soared from 50 students to more than 200. "The Community Learning Center at Oyler School has created a one-stop shop for all the needs of our students and their families," says Hockenberry. "No longer does a family in poverty have to go all through the city to get the basic medical, dental, mental health, counseling and academic needs met. It is all located in the heart of their community right where it always should have been."

True Impact

Like in Long Beach, another goal of the Cincinnati-based Community Schools, which are known as charter

"The Community Learning Center at Oyler School has created a one-stop shop for all the needs of our students and their families."

—Craig D. Hockenberry, Principal of the Oyler Community Learning Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.



Riverview fourth grade teacher Bea Souder talks with a student.



From left, Rebecca Kelly, District Vice President of the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati, stands with Dr. Eugene Smith, Principal of the Riverview East Community Learning Center and Rochelle Morton, Director of CincyAfterSchool, a YMCA partner.

schools, is to create greater parent involvement. “Unfortunately, some parents had felt shut out of some of the schools,” Kelley says. “And we really want to impact them. Leadership in the school has to be open to the voice of the parents and the voice of the community, and that is a real culture shock for some people. But the YMCA provides a friendlier atmosphere for parents to talk about those kinds of problems.”

With the help of parents, Kelley says, the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati was able to uncover certain health problems, which were causing children to suffer academically. To address the problem, the YMCA, in partnership with Growing Well Cincinnati, provided healthcare and advice, in one case offering counsel from a van that sat outside a school. And increased parent involvement has also helped to get poor attendance rates back up, Kelley says.

Community Schools can also provide important growth opportunities for parents and help them gain the

confidence and skills to go on and get meaningful jobs, says Dr. Christina Russo, principal of Winton Hills Academy, a Cincinnati public school with a Community Learning Center. “We recently had an unemployed parent who became part of the school’s leadership and planning team, who then went on to work part-time for the Y’s afterschool program. She now works full-time for an agency that is part of our Community Learning Center,” Russo says.

Overall, through the YMCA of Cincinnati’s involvement with the Community Schools program, a true social center has evolved—and everyone has benefited. “The program has taken us to new levels and increased our stature in the community,” says Kelley. “There are no higher stakes than the education of our youth. For the YMCA to be a part of that and to fulfill our unique role in building community through schools is the sweet spot.” ■

 **If your YMCA is interested in partnering with the Coalition for Community Schools, e-mail ccs@iel.org.**

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