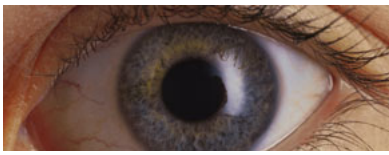


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eye on RESEARCH

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY: STRATEGIES THAT WORK

A new study identifies leadership strategies for engaging community stakeholders to create effective community schools.

Across the U.S., an increasing number of school and community leaders, in districts small, large, urban, and rural, are working together to create schools that are the hub of their communities. These schools work with partners to integrate community resources into the schools, offering academic, social, emotional, and other forms of support to students and their families so that, together, they can improve student learning and strengthen the fabric of their communities.



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A growing body of research documents the positive outcomes produced by these community schools (see box, pg. 8). But until now, little research has been conducted about the leadership strategies that are most effective for creating sustainable, effective community schools that improve student achievement and engage a wide range of community stakeholders. Understanding why and how education and community leaders are pursuing and sustaining this path is the purpose of an ongoing study

being conducted by the Coalition for Community Schools, an initiative of the Institute for Educational Leadership, in partnership with Collaborative Communications Group, with support from the Stuart Foundation.

We are conducting interviews and focus group discussions with leaders from local government, business, school systems, philanthropy, United Ways, and other nonprofit and community-based organizations. They come from Chicago, Ill.; Evansville, Ind.; Lincoln, Nebr.; Saint Paul, Minn.; Long Beach and San Francisco, Calif.; Portland/Multnomah County, Ore.; and Tukwila, Wash. They are knowledgeable about the needs of young people in their communities and take pride in their communities' efforts. Most importantly, these leaders are focused on results.

"Right now, we can demonstrate that the two lowest-income schools in the district are doing better than the district average," says Tom Kingston, president of the Wilder Foundation in Saint Paul. Arne Duncan, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, says, "We are seeing improvements across the board in Chicago schools: 74 percent of all schools show test score increases. However, 81 percent of community schools are making gains. We are also seeing reductions in truancy, discipline, and mobility rates in community schools." These data confirm findings from the Coalition's 2002 analysis of 20 evaluations of community school initiatives: Community schools have measurable impact on student performance, parent and family involvement, school functioning, and community capacity.

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES THAT WORK

The experiences of these leaders offer important lessons about what it takes to bring school and community together to create and sustain community schools.

• • • **Leaders understand that the whole community must work together if children are to succeed in school and life.** They advocate for creating expanded supports, understanding that young people who are successful in one area of their development are more likely to be successful in other areas. “It’s the premier prevention strategy,” says Diane Linn, Multnomah County Chair. “The success of getting kids through 12th grade on to higher education has everything to do with quality of life throughout the entire community in regard to public safety, governance, health, drug, and alcohol issues.” Nearly 50 elementary and middle schools in Multnomah County now operate as part of the SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) initiative.

Bill Johnston, publisher of the *Journal Star*, the daily newspaper in Lincoln, Nebr., shares Linn’s commitment. “If students are going to do better, they need more opportunities and more time. Leaders in Lincoln know this and are working to make it a reality,” says Johnston,

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS?

Using schools as a hub, community schools bring together public and private organizations to offer a range of services, supports, and opportunities that strengthen and support schools, communities, families, and students—before, during, and after school. Schools and communities develop reciprocal and mutually supportive relationships.

Research shows that effective community schools can:

- increase academic achievement and improve the social, emotional, and physical well-being of children;
- foster strong relationships between families and schools in support of student learning;
- make schools and communities safer and more supportive places; and
- use scarce public, private, and community resources more efficiently.

The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of national, state, and local organizations in K-16 education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy, as well as national, state, and local community-school networks. It links leaders and advocates from many communities to share successes and seek solutions to common challenges. The Coalition is housed and staffed by The Institute for Educational Leadership.

For more information go to www.communityschools.org.

who chairs the Leadership Council for the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) that now serve nearly half of Lincoln’s elementary schools.

• • • **Leaders take their commitment to the public.** They make opportunities to talk about how important it is for public schools to be the hub of their neighborhoods. The Chicago Campaign to Expand Community Schools has set a goal of creating 100 community schools, and Superintendent Arne Duncan says, “We are redefining what it means to be a school.” Warren Chapman of BankOne, a leading community partner for the Chicago effort, says simply, “It’s the right thing to do... and the most important thing to do now.” Commitment to community schools from visible leaders helps to create a vision of a new, responsive institution arising in communities, and enhances the public’s support for public schools.

• • • **Leaders work to build political support.** Commitment from elected officials, including mayors, county commissioners, and school board members, is key to securing community support. In several of these communities, elected officials meet periodically across jurisdictions to discuss matters of mutual interest and concern. “We want to build an understanding that ‘If you go do something by yourself, your chances of succeeding are not very good,’” says Dianne Iverson, education policy advisor in the Multnomah County Chair’s office. School superintendents are finding that the community has invaluable assets and that they need to think beyond traditional education dollars and governance structures. They need to become more comfortable in the political arena to ensure support for their schools.

• • • **Leaders prepare for—and manage—transitions in leadership.** When the longtime superintendent of schools in Lincoln announced that he planned to retire, the school board included support for the CLCs as one of the criteria for choosing his successor. After Susan Gourley became superintendent, but before she officially assumed her new position, she met with members of the Leadership Council and developed the relationships with community partners that are key to sustaining support. She is now working to expand health and social services, as well as after-school programs, for children and their families, and to create more community schools in Lincoln.

• • • **Leaders seek better use of existing resources.** Community school leaders are rethinking the way existing resources and programs are being used. They see community schools as a way of increasing the impact

of their investments. Multnomah County's commissioners financed the expansion of the SUN initiative during a period of budget reductions because they represented a more efficient use of taxpayers' funds. Lincoln redirects city funds to support community school coordinator positions, while the St. Paul school district is reorganizing the way it provides student services to utilize both district personnel and health and human service organizations from the community. In Chicago, non-profit organizations are the lead partners in managing community schools, and more than 300 organizations are committing resources to children and families through community schools. "We tell them to get out of the bricks-and-mortar business and come in and operate in schools," says Duncan.

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"Commitment to community schools from visible leaders helps to create a vision of a new, responsive institution arising in communities, and enhances the public's support for public schools."

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• • • **Leaders seek innovative strategies to ensure sustainability.** Leaders recognize that strategies to reengineer existing resources will be insufficient by themselves—they seek solutions that can provide long-term support for direct services and critical resources for coordination. For example, the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority, which invests in community development, challenged other banks in Lincoln to match its five-year commitment to support community schools. Multnomah County has developed a School Age Policy Framework that establishes community schools as the model for delivering preventive services in the county. Lincoln is considering a small property tax increase, sponsored jointly by the school district and the city, while leaders in St. Paul believe that they can build public support for community schools if they can demonstrate sustained improvement in results.

Leaders of community schools are taking their schools and communities in new directions, forming partnerships and coalitions to achieve results that matter. They are breaking down the barriers that have separated schools from local government agencies and nonprofit

organizations for too long. They are beginning to see the rewards of their work, including improved student attendance, discipline, and achievement; greater parent and community involvement in schools and other community activities; and neighborhoods that are



revitalized around their schools. And they are affirming, once again, the importance of leadership in uniting communities so that all young people have opportunities to succeed. • • •

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