Community schools are one solution to the fact that “schools can’t do it alone.” Today’s youth need comprehensive, coordinated support services provided in schools through partnerships.

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Full-service community schools: A strategy—not a program

Joy Dryfoos

What are “full-service community schools,” and what do they have to do with youth development? Community schools are those that have been intentionally transformed into neighborhood hubs and that are open all the time to children and their families. In these buildings, a range of support services is provided by community agencies to help overcome the many barriers that schools face in producing successful students. What makes these schools different is that they are operated through partnership agreements between public schools and community agencies. They are not to be confused with charter schools, which operate outside the formal school system. These are regular public schools that are undergoing transformation within the system.

Advocates for full-service community schools believe that today’s schools cannot possibly take on all the problems of today’s children and their parents. The pressures from No Child Left Behind are enormous, draining teachers’ energy and demoralizing administrators, who recognize that there is more to education than testing. Schools need other agencies to share some of the responsibility.
They need help being open all the time, including before and after school, evenings, weekends, and summers. They want access to comprehensive support services, including primary-care health clinics, dentistry, mental health counseling and treatment, family social work, parent education, enhanced learning opportunities, community development, and whatever else is needed in that school community. One of the mantras of this emerging field is “no two alike”; each community school evolves according to the particular needs and resources of the population and the neighborhood.

**Benefits for youth development**

We know that young people thrive when they are surrounded by supportive adults and effective parents. The most fundamental concept in healthy child development is attachment. A child must have access to a responsible adult, if not a parent, as well as someone like a teacher, mentor, or counselor. This concept is actualized by bringing into the school building both practitioners and parents to supplement the teaching and support staff already in place. The goal of full-service community schools is to generate a truly child-centered environment. Efforts can start with very young children and continue all the way through lifetime learning for parents and grandparents.

**Early intervention**

The importance of pre-K programs is now widely recognized, especially for disadvantaged children to begin the process of learning and living with other people. Children require attention from their earliest years, and this must be sustained as they go through school. Increasingly, practitioners are focusing on pre-K–12 clusters of community schools.

**Access to ongoing supports, services, and opportunities**

The positive youth development approach revolves around several key constructs: that young people have, and are developing, assets as they move toward productive adulthood; that young people are
agents of their own development, not just passive recipients of services, and that all young people need ongoing access to positive developmental supports, services, and opportunities as they move through childhood and adolescence. By their very nature and definition, community schools are a perfect strategy for promoting positive youth development because they dramatically increase the developmental assets available on a regular basis to young people and their families.

**Parent involvement**

We have accumulated a lot of experience in how to involve parents in schools. The first point of contact can be outreach into the home, that is, inviting the family into the school community and helping parents understand the way the school works. Community schools can offer a wide array of programs and services, with particular attention to cultural differences and language barriers.

**Community involvement**

Because community schools encompass the whole neighborhood, these new institutions are interested in community development. In some of these schools, the surrounding area serves as a laboratory for studying the environment, history, and sociology, while in other schools, the students learn by giving service to community groups such as senior citizens or nursery schools.

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**An exemplary community school**

One has only to visit a fully implemented community school to see the warm and stimulating environment that collaboration can produce. The Quitman Street Community School (preschool–4) in Newark, New Jersey, is an example of a community school with a strong lead agency—Community Agencies Corporation of New Jersey—and a comprehensive family involvement component.\(^1\) The school building is teeming with activity; parents are involved in the classroom, on the playground, and in the cafeteria. After-school activities are designed to extend what goes on in the classroom.
Teachers, parents, and school and agency support workers confer with each other to ensure that every child can function well within the school system. Parents are encouraged to “hang out” in the parent resource room, where they have access to computers, food, and advisers, as well as support and friendship with each other. Family members have access to trained medical personnel, including dentists, in a well-equipped clinic; social workers are on the site. The students perform better under these circumstances and clearly feel better in the vastly improved school climate. The neighborhood has improved as well, with a new playground designed by the students and constructed by neighborhood residents and corporate volunteers, and a street clean-up campaign organized by the parents.

In successful community schools, the community agency personnel and the school-oriented parents bring a strong youth development perspective into the school environment. Although teachers and administrators know that they must address the developmental needs of children and youth, they welcome the additional “hands” to work with them on the hands-on approaches required. Personal attention takes time. So does coordination.

One key to the success of schools like Quitman is the presence of a full-time coordinator—in this case supplied by the lead agency, who acts as a peer to the principal. The coordinator takes on the job of organizing the support services and involving the parents. Together with the principal, the coordinator works to integrate these activities with what goes on in classrooms. The principal is freed up to concentrate on academic achievement, which is, after all, the central purpose of the school.

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**From concept to social movement**

The concept of community schools is not really new; these ideas of collaboration and community orientation have been around for over a century. However, the current version is more complex than in the past, probably because the problems and pressures are greatly heightened and because young people need a higher level of devel-
opment than ever before if they are to have the skills necessary in contemporary adulthood. No other generation has had to deal with the strong arm of the No Child Left Behind Act, which is forcing schools to concentrate on “teaching to the test” and making pariahs out of students, teachers, and schools labeled as “failing.”

The current crop of community schools has grown out of adversity, with the decay of the inner city and the widening of the achievement gap. Around 1990, various models began to emerge from around the country in a surge of spontaneous innovation. Those working independently to bring support services and outside community agencies into schools and enrich the intellectual and social environment included social workers at the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in New York; faculty at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; city and county officials in Portland, Oregon; health providers and private foundations in California; state officials in Florida and New Jersey, and a school principal in Evansville, Indiana. The leaders of these efforts came together in 1998 under the auspices of the Institute for Educational Leadership, in Washington, D.C. The Coalition for Community Schools was launched and now has 170 participating organizations representing the educational establishment and unions, youth development organizations, health and welfare agencies, and other interested parties. Through the coalition platform, school and youth development people can communicate with and learn from each other.

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**Progress to date**

The community school concept does not yet have wide recognition in the educational world. School reformers are just beginning to acknowledge its importance and to incorporate “collaboration” into their thinking. Envision a continuum of services from a single activity, such as an after-school program, to the whole package, such as the Quitman Street Community School. These single activities are avenues to the fully developed model, and they are rapidly proliferating.
After-school programs have received the most attention, at least from the federal government. More than seven thousand schools have received grants through the billion-dollar annual expenditures of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program to open the schoolhouse doors in the afternoons and summers, frequently under the auspices of community-based youth agencies such as Boys & Girls Clubs, Y’s, and other nonprofits. At least fifteen hundred schools have primary health care clinics, with services provided by local community health centers or hospitals. It has been estimated that more than five thousand family resource centers are located in schools. These are, of course, central pieces to the whole package but without further development will not significantly change the climate of the school. They will remain “addons” that are dropped into the building without integration with what goes on in the classroom and therefore will not significantly affect the outcomes.

The “further development” is the real challenge to both youth development workers and educators. At the moment, the constituent components of community schools are ensconced in their own domains or silos. For example, educators come out of schools of education with little knowledge of youth development and behavioral psychology. Social workers come out of schools of social work with virtually no exposure to what goes on in classrooms. Yet for contemporary youth to be served, each domain has to be entered and mastered by the other.

The “lead agency” is a vital partner in this enterprise and usually hires the on-site coordinator—the person responsible for putting all the pieces together and making sure that they are integrating into the school. The coordinator works closely with the principal to interpret the community school strategy and spirit to the school staff. The lead agency personnel and other outside staff brought in to perform various functions must also learn how to operate within the school’s culture and procedures. It is particularly important for teachers to be oriented toward community schooling and learn to benefit from the services offered.
But the arrangements that will put all these pieces together take time. A needs-and-resource assessment must be conducted to determine what already exists and what is needed. An oversight committee must be formed, representing teachers, support personnel, administrators, parents, and even students, as well as the community. The plan that emerges can take more than a year of dialogue, starting with an educational process about the concepts and including specifications about who will do what and who will pay for whatever is done.

Going to scale

We are convinced that the concept underlying community schools is important to the healthy development of millions of young people. They cannot succeed in schools that are failing. Schools need help from community agencies, not only to provide support services but to change the environment and climate of the school building. Innovative initiatives are under way all over the country (and in many other countries as well), but going to scale represents a major challenge in most cities. An entire school system must embrace this strategy and be willing to let the “outsiders” in. City and county agencies have to be willing to share their resources and their personnel.

Prognosis for the future

Repeated attempts to introduce legislation at the federal level have not gotten very far. Everyone is so fixated on No Child Left Behind that it is difficult to find sponsorship for even a small appropriation for the development of community schools. Yet despite budget cuts and uncertainties, there are still categorical sources that can be tapped for different components of community schools.

I believe that the future of community schools lies in two places: (1) the strength of the demand that emanates from the local level and (2) the high quality of the people all around the country who are responding to that demand. It is encouraging to observe how quickly both school and community agency personnel respond to
the full-service community school strategy when they are exposed to it. An educational process is under way to instruct the appropriate stakeholders that, if they develop collaborative relationships, they heighten the chances of achieving their mutual goals. School personnel and parents must get together and recognize that their communities can become more responsive to the developmental needs of the children.

**Note**


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