

Community Schools

THE PROBLEM

Almost half of the nation's public-school students live in poverty, a 25% increase from just a decade ago. In some states the percentage of low-income students is even higher—in Mississippi, for example, 71% of public school students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

This statistic is particularly concerning because of the correlation between socioeconomic class and academic success. The Center of American Progress reports that the “average cognitive scores of prekindergarten children in the highest socioeconomic status group are 60% above the scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group.” And as a child's education progresses, her economic class and educational attainment continues to correlate. Low-income 16-24 year olds are four times more likely to drop out than their higher-income counterparts. For these students, outside obstacles and disadvantages – such as inadequate or crowded housing, food insecurity, or insufficient healthcare – may impact their success inside the classroom. And unfortunately, the students who need extra educational resources are least likely to receive them: high-poverty schools (meaning schools with a student body that is 76% – 100% low-income) spend less per student than any other schools. This further diminishes potential academic success and perpetuates the existing cycle of poverty.

THE SOLUTION

Community schools partner with service providers, health providers, after-school programs, youth centers, and other community organizations or providers to ensure holistic attention, education, and service provision for students.

There are a number of different models of community schools, depending on the attending student body and their specific needs. However, most community school programs center around five elements. While the first, academics, is a



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traditional focus of public schools, the remaining three are specific to the model.

POLICY ISSUES

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH: Many community schools provide access to quality healthcare to students. In one **Cincinnati** high school, students had little access to quality healthcare or nutritious food and many were suffering from preventable illnesses and malnutrition. As part of its approach to community schooling, the school implemented a robust health clinic, a food pantry, and a community garden. Studies indicate improved student attendance and grades when schools provide quality healthcare.

Some community schools provide therapy, behavioral counseling, and family counseling, along with other mental health services. In one **Philadelphia** middle school, implementing counseling and therapy caused suspensions to decrease from 464 to 163 over six years.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES: Often, community schools focus on parent involvement to ensure a child's success. In **Albuquerque**, after consistently low levels of parent engagement, the city hired parent liaisons from each school to facilitate additional communication between other parents and administrators. Each liaison was multi-lingual

and had strong ties to the community. As a result, parent involvement increased.

In **Sacramento**, the Parent-Teacher Home Visits program requires teachers to visit their students homes twice a year, for a deeper understanding of the student's background and more substantial communication between parents and teachers. The program also includes twice-yearly parent-teacher team meetings that allow parents to share strategies they use at home and give teachers the opportunity to suggest additional activities.

In **San Mateo County**, community school parents demonstrated statistically significant changes in their level of participation, including a 93% parent/teacher conferences attendance rate.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A community school should be a resource for community members, as well. By providing services, programs, events, and opportunities, community schools can actively improve neighborhoods and generate increased community investment in the school's success.

In **Sunnyside, NY**, the local school has an on-site community center that actively reaches out to immigrant parents and provides career counseling, arts and recreation, life-skills development and training, and ESOL classes for parents. There are workshops, potluck dinners, and performances. The community center is open until 10 PM and on weekends to ensure that most parents can attend regardless of their work schedule.

In **Portland, OR**, The Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) initiatives keeps schools open 14 hours a day to serve as community centers. They partner with parks, other community centers, churches, health clinics, and other business for resources, academic assistance, family programming, adult education, and other service provisions and programming.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT PREVENTION: In **Oakland**, Justice Oakland Youth partners with community schools to encourage responsibility and communication skills through restorative justice. The program was implemented in response to the high rates of suspension and student incarceration. As a result, expulsion and violence rates are down and at one middle school the rate of suspensions has dropped more than 75%.

RESULTS

Data shows that community schools improve the lives students and parents, and help benefit the community.

Students in Community Schools generally improve academically. One school in **Alameda County** saw its API (the State's Academic Performance Index, more rigorous than the federal standard) increase by 41 points, more than double the average county increase rate of 19.2. Students at the Children's Aid Society (CAS) community schools, which are 21 **New York City** schools located in low-income areas in South Bronx, East Harlem, Staten Island and Washington Heights, consistently score higher than other public school students in the city. Every CAS community school scored at least 70% on progress, compared to the 50% city average. What's more, CAS schools consistently increase the academic progress of the lowest 1/3 of students by at least a year.

Graduation rates are also higher in community schools. In **Tukwila, WA**, the graduation rate has increased consistently for 13 years. In Chicago, one community high school has double the graduation rate than the city average. And in **Cincinnati**, after one school district transformed to become entirely community schools, the overall graduation rate has shot up from 51% before it was a community school to 82%.

Attendance also improves. In **Providence, RI**, students in community schools showed 55% fewer instances of consistent absences than in other schools and students who participated in the Family Literacy program had an attendance rate of 97%. What's more, 46% of parents in the Family Literacy program increased two grade levels in reading.

By focusing both on academic achievement and on other issues or concerns that might be plaguing a student or their family, community schools benefit students, families, and neighborhoods.

RESOURCES

For more information on this issue, please check out the **Coalition of Community Schools** at www.communityschools.org, **Center for Popular Democracy** at www.populardemocracy.org, and the **Center for American Progress** at www.americanprogress.org.