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The Real Turnaround

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Muchas de las cosas/que nosotros
necesitamos/pueden esperar, los niños
no pueden,/ahora es el momento,/
sus huesos están en formación,/su
sangre también lo está/y sus sentidos
se están desarrollando,/a él nosotros
no podemos contestarle/mañana,
su nombre es hoy.

—GABRIELA MISTRAL



Ted Purinton and Carlos Azcoitia

The Real Turnaround

Many of the things we need can wait.
The child cannot. Right now is the time his
bones are being formed, his blood is being
made, and his senses are being developed.
To him we cannot answer tomorrow,
his name is today.

—GABRIELA MISTRAL

Chilean educator and poet Gabriela Mistral warned that children's needs are immediate and comprise more than just academic concerns. Implementing comprehensive community schools is an increasingly successful approach to taking her warning to heart, particularly in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. The reason is simple: education does not occur in isolation from the rest of a student's life. Other factors and institutions—family, community, nonprofit organizations, churches, universities, and businesses—play important roles in a child's successful education. Children, in fact, have much to teach schools about the neighborhoods they serve. Schools cannot escape and should not disregard interdependence with outside factors that influence whether and how students learn. Instead, schools must seize opportunities to connect students and

families to resources and support, rather than lament the prevalence of outside negative influences (Block, 2009).

By expanding their boundaries, schools become stronger and engage parents and the community (Chadwick, 2003). Schools have the power to become the focus of the community, connected to daily lives and experiences and able to share the educational responsibilities with other partners, but the ways that some schools go about expanding their boundaries diminish the full potential of real partnerships. When the school sees itself as the hub of its community—and perhaps believes that it is the community's most important institution—it sets itself up as a didactic outsider. A comprehensive community school, however, sees itself as a node in a complex web of key relationships within a community; it also acknowledges its power and uses that power

to mobilize groups, provide services, and educate citizens (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). The list of attributes is nearly endless, but there are a few specific things that comprehensive community schools do to serve their neighborhoods.

Extended school days. When designed in meaningful ways, an extended school day can help students who are at risk capitalize on their strengths so that they grow up to be competent, caring, and responsible. Opportunities include a variety of academic, social, and recreational activities to accommodate different learning needs and styles.

Parent education. With a seamless connection between what classroom teachers do during traditional school hours and what happens after school, family engagement can occur through English language courses, parenting courses, voter drives, high school equivalency tutoring, and so forth. Schools can tie such classes into extended school day activities and offer childcare services so that all members of a family can be at school at once. When P–12 schools assume that junior colleges can take care of such needs, they forget that many parents are unable to drive across town or pay large fees for tuition or childcare.

Clinic partnerships. Partnerships with health agencies allow schools to offer health fairs, conferences, and health and dental services to families. By offering space to a physician or dentist, schools can help shape unique healthcare options for their neighborhoods that reflect the local landscape of insurance, regulations, and costs.

Community-building support. Family support can be provided through counseling sessions and initiatives on financial education, neighborhood improvement, community safety, and immigration rights.

Immigrant support. Especially in neighborhoods populated by immigrants, community schools serve a special function in welcoming diverse cultures and unique talents to our society. In too many communities, as well as in the schools within those communities, new immigrants face an uphill battle in achieving rewards for their hard and innovative work or potential. Community schools can serve as political advocates for immigrant families by providing them with education and matching them with important resources.

A Progressive School Model

John Spry Community School is a PreK–12 community school in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood that serves a majority of immigrant families (Axelroth, 2009; Azcoitia,

2006). Students have flourished with excellent attendance, above average achievement growth, and nearly 100% postsecondary enrollment. Open six days a week with a year-round schedule and longer school day, it is an institution where families learn together to improve the quality of life in their communities, city, and country.

The school developed with some very unique practices to better accommodate children and families from the local community. Classes begin late in the day for high school students; students participate in a junior ROTC/physical education program that promotes teamwork and self-discipline and fosters respect and leadership. Summer school is used only to encourage high school graduation within three years, rather than four.

Partnerships with postsecondary institutions that have committed to social justice and high expectations for all students provide dual enrollment classes for advanced college credit. A partnership with Chicago's National Louis University, as well as other colleges and universities, exemplifies this effort. All students are also expected to complete virtual high school classes. A healthy lifestyle for families is promoted through a clinic located inside the school, the result of a partnership with Alivio Medical Center.

Spry's students are advocates for issues they regard as vital concerns and become involved in planning what they will be doing. For example, all high school students serve as tutors in the primary grades. They participate in workshops to enhance their skills as reading buddies and increase their knowledge in the teaching of reading. Internships in agencies surrounding the school expand their experiences to serve other members of the community. And their involvement in other local institutions has included advocacy for a neighborhood public library, a play lot for preschool children, and peace marches. The students realize that their engagement makes a difference, and they are connected to others through mutual work on common goals.

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Indicators

Student academic growth has been the primary indicator of school success since No Child Left Behind. Although academic growth is very important, comprehensive community schools look for broader indicators that they have strong social, economic, and political bearing on the neighborhoods they serve. Fundamentally, community schools seek participation within the lives of their neighborhoods, and

they work to get their neighborhoods involved in the life of the schools. So, the main differentiators between a community school and any other school can be summarized in the ways that community schools assess themselves. Although they are deeply aware of achievement, they also work to ensure that they meet other important standards for community empowerment.

Social and physical development. Community schools focus on the social and physical development of students as much as they focus on academic achievement. They not only recognize that healthy communities are literate, intellectual, and economically viable but also prioritize physical well-being, longevity, happiness, camaraderie, and beauty. Community schools, therefore, provide social services and health care; link with government and clinical agencies; and maintain strong relationships with religious organizations, community organizations, and businesses. They care about whether incoming students are at their expected weight range for their age as much as whether they have some basic academic skills.

For example, Hibbard Elementary, in a predominantly low-income and immigrant neighborhood on Chicago's northwest side, just opened a health clinic to serve the needs of students and their family members. By converting two classrooms into the clinic and building a separate entrance so that the clinic can stay open during breaks, many families without other access to healthcare are able to obtain free services. The school and its partner healthcare organization, Heartland Alliance, believe that offering those services will reduce sickness overall among children at Hibbard.

Economic impact. Every school is an integral part of its community's economic climate, whether it is a district-managed neighborhood school, a charter school, a magnet school, or something else. Most schools hire local residents as classroom aides; many schools also prefer to hire teachers who have lived in their communities. Community schools take this sentiment one step further: they are intentional about serving their communities and making their communities desirable places to live. Local residents assist in the hiring of teachers, classes are offered to parents to meet their unique needs, and banks discuss money management with administrators. Unlike schools that are managed from district offices in distant neighborhoods or education management organizations halfway across the country, comprehensive community schools are familiar with the economic

climate of their neighborhoods and work to enhance their overall economic vitality.

Schools in the Paramount Unified School District in south-central Los Angeles County provide community-based English tutoring to parents and other community members who are not native English speakers, using lessons to emphasize parenting and job skills. In one lesson, a group of parents will likely learn tips for checking their children's homework as well as strategies for obtaining a job in a tough economic climate. This tutoring, along with the activities of many other school-city partnerships, has helped create a community that is comparatively safe and increasingly attractive for families in the south Los Angeles area.

Community empowerment. Community schools want to see local residents effectively involved in the life of city and state politics. They don't just encourage voting, but work to create leadership within and beyond their own neighborhoods. They do not expect their communities to provide them with resources; they work in partnership with families, businesses, local officials,

and agencies to collectively make decisions about the role of the school within the community. Ultimately, community schools want to give residents in their neighborhoods a voice so that they are full participants in local politics and local institutions.

For example, Community Organizing and Family Issues, a community-based organization in Chicago that partners with several schools, empowers families to participate in developing policies to enhance educational opportunities for students, such as effective and fair discipline programs and student recess. Another example is Mikva Challenge: this Chicago-based organization teaches students about local and national politics by facilitating their participation in multiple political campaigns and raising awareness of the needs of residents and communities. Several high schools in Chicago have developed partnerships with Mikva Challenge to provide political empowerment strategies for students and their families.

Well-rounded education. All publicly funded schools must adhere to various sets of academic standards. This does not mean, however, that schools should not listen to the educational needs of their neighborhoods. By understanding the essential aspects of local community life that can be addressed in their curricula and then adapting the curricula accordingly, community schools deliberately seek

Community schools build trust within their neighborhoods so that they can get a better handle on attendance concerns, postsecondary culture, and safety.

community reinforcement for their academic agenda. Community schools build trust within their neighborhoods so that they can get a better handle on attendance concerns, postsecondary culture, and safety. They do not consider themselves as coming into the community from outside to “save” or “fix” children or neighborhoods; instead, they seek to be as much a part of the community as possible.

For example, the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative operates multiple community schools that have comprehensive programs for students, parents, and community members. Results demonstrate advancements in achievement scores as well as other measures in participating schools. In Multnomah County, OR, Schools Uniting Neighborhoods developed community learning centers to support youth and help them improve their achievement scores and attendance and reduce discipline problems.

With much attention paid to successful community-based projects, it is easy for most schools to think that the only way to develop powerful community wraparound services is through substantial external funding. Community schools, however, know that to sit around and wait for money is both unwise and disempowering. They believe that partnering with local businesses, social services, and politicians is ultimately more empowering to residents and families. And they also realize that doing so may be an essential missing piece in the puzzle of student achievement.

First Steps

The following are some practical steps to get started on building a community school.

Start the conversation. Rather than working hard to unveil a well-defined plan to the community, work with the community to determine needs, both within the school and across the community. Don’t assume that the community wants to be “fixed,” either. Perhaps the community already has an agenda; it is safest and most respectful for the school, then, to initiate a discussion about how the community sees itself and where the school fits into that picture. Possible opportunities may grow from that; pushing too hard from the outside will only risk the relationship.

Build leadership capacity. No individual principal, teacher leader, or parent leader can single-handedly lead a school-community partnership. Many individuals must be involved. Yet assigning leadership roles may not get the partnerships started effectively. Instead, a sense of distributed leadership must be built, and parents, teachers, and other community members will all need a collective understanding of what good leadership is and how to make it happen. This is a long-term process, not one that can be addressed in a short speech or training session. Consistent leadership development should be a routine process of any community school.

Look for resources from places looking for users.

Health clinics in urban neighborhoods, for example, struggle to find ways to bring services to undocumented immigrants. Social workers need doors within communities opened for them. Funders look for sustainable ways to make a difference. Community schools offer providers of all sorts with opportunities to deliver services and experiment with new approaches.

Communicate effectively and often. Finding ways to communicate progress, goals, challenges, and opportunities can be difficult, especially in communities where Internet access may be weak. Nonetheless, community schools get creative by tapping into informal networks, such as through churches and sporting events.

Evaluate effectiveness and perceptions. Although it is important to constantly evaluate progress, it is also equally important to evaluate how the community and the school are perceiving the relationships. Formal surveys are fine, but informal conversations might be just as useful.

A community school is not just an additional program. It is a way of thinking, acting, and working together so that students can achieve and families and communities are strengthened for the common good. As Elizabeth Harrison, a proponent of the American kindergarten movement and the founder of National Louis University, claimed, “True democracy that will give to every person life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can be attained when the rights of childhood have been established and the guardians of childhood are consecrated to their work” (L. Tafel, personal communication, 2011). **PL**

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