

Here Comes the SUN

Lightening the Load for Poor Students and Families

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PORTLAND, Oregon—In a brightly lit classroom, at 5 p.m. on a chilly January afternoon, an excited band of fifth- and sixth-graders are learning how to operate a video camera. Just across the hall in the gym, volunteer dads are teaching two teams of aspiring basketball players how to dribble, pass, and shoot. Peek through another classroom window and you see a ballet class—10 small bodies standing tall with heads held high.

Welcome to Humboldt School, the latest addition to Multnomah County's innovative SUN community school initiative. Short for Schools Uniting Neighborhoods, SUN schools are full-service community schools, which offer an extended school day and access to social services via neighborhood schools. In 2009, the SUN school program served 14,773 K–12 students in 53 schools—most of them in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Humboldt's after-school array includes free classes in everything from art, music, and dance to sports, science, and computing. Class teachers are paid to hold tutoring and homework clubs.

This winter term, 175 members of the school's 275-strong student body have enrolled in the after-school program.

"It's something I truly believe in," says Willie Poinsette, the school principal. "It helps us level the playing field. Our kids may come from homes where they can't afford to take classes in piano, art, hip-hop, chess—the list goes on," says Poinsette. "Being able to offer this program gives them access to the arts that they wouldn't ordinarily have. And on the academic side, they have tutoring and help with their homework. It all helps keep them hooked into school."

Part of a nationwide community schools movement that places schools at the center of the social services safety net, SUN aims to help low-income students succeed in school and life, and their parents to become self-sufficient. Healthy breakfasts, substantial suppers, and social services run alongside rigorous academic programs.

"Kids come to school with a lot of baggage," says Peggy Samolinski, who administers the program for Multnomah County. "If they are hungry they don't learn well. If they haven't slept well they can't pay attention. If there is

domestic violence in the home, they're disturbed by that. If they are worried about their mother, if they are sleeping in their car, if someone is abusing drugs or alcohol—all those things are the baggage that kids bring to school. SUN tries to be the hub for those kids, either delivering or brokering services to meet these many needs."

Partnerships Are Essential

Multnomah County's \$4 million SUN school program is just one of seven programs in the \$27.2 million SUN Service System that serves children and families across the county. The county pays the lion's share of the funding, supplemented by significant contributions from the City of Portland, six school districts, dozens of nonprofits and businesses, and a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant.

"The SUN program is our largest anti-poverty initiative," explains Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler. "People ask me 'Why is the county involved with education? That's a state responsibility.' My answer is: 'No, it is all of our responsibility. As an antipoverty agency we have a vested interest in keeping kids in school."

SUN after school sports teams and arts programs capture children's enthusiasm and hook them into school, says Humboldt School's principal Willie Poinette. "It allows us to develop the whole child," she says.





The nonprofit Chess For Success runs chess clubs in 87 schools around greater Portland and in Southwest Washington. Students can compete in regional and state tournaments.

We want families to be success-generating units, and this is the most cost-effective way to do that.”

Every SUN school is different, forming its activities in response to the specific needs of its student body, but all have a full-time paid site coordinator and a common core of services: breakfast and supper, an extended school day, summer programming, fun after-school activities, homework support, tutoring, and health services. The SUN site coordinator works closely with the school principal and other school personnel to create programming for that school.

SUN schools also run classes for parents—citizenship or adult English as a Second Language classes, for example. Many also act as community centers holding craft nights, weatherization workshops, and more.

SUN’s goals are ambitious: to provide health and social services to disadvantaged children, to increase educational achievement, to strengthen links between families and schools, to promote a wide range of school-community partnerships, and to eliminate the achievement gap that mires poor and minority children in poverty.

Partnerships with outside agencies help SUN schools meet those goals. SUN schools refer families to health providers and for food stamps. They refer at-risk teens and homeless families to case management programs. They broker help with energy and rent assistance, mental health services, and drug and alcohol

treatment. One SUN program supports gay, lesbian, and transgendered teens. More than 350 nonprofit and business partners and 2,100 volunteers help make SUN successful.

“The model in Multnomah County is very strong,” says Shital Shah, a research associate with the Coalition for Community Schools at the nonprofit Institute of Educational Leadership. “It’s very much a partnership-driven strategy and has a big family and community engagement component, which I think is very important.”

Each SUN school is managed by one

of 10 nonprofit human services contractors. They include IRCO, an immigrant and refugee support agency and El Programa Hispano, which works with Latino families. Self Enhancement Inc. (SEI), an education nonprofit with a strong track record and roots in Portland’s African American community, manages six K–12 SUN schools, including Humboldt.

Site Coordinator Is Crucial

Natalie Christiansen works from 10 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., four days a week as Humboldt School’s SUN site coordinator. A Multnomah University graduate, Christiansen hoped to land a job in public relations. But, while working with children at an after-school club she discovered her passion. Four schools later, Christiansen is a seasoned after-school program manager.

“I love it,” she says, “You have a role somewhere in between a mentor and a teacher, so you get to do a bit of both. It’s fun, and the parents really appreciate it.”

Ably supported by Stephanie Harvey, a part-time program assistant with family connections to the school, Christiansen organizes and schedules classes and tutoring, builds relationships with

Research Earns SUN Political Support

In 2004, some Multnomah County commissioners, facing tough fiscal decisions, questioned the value of the SUN Service System. “They wanted to know, was it something with real relevance or was it just fluff?” says Peggy Samolinski, who coordinates the \$27 million program. “They looked at what we were doing and said: ‘It’s a sewing club. What can that possibly have to do with anything, and how can we be funding that, when we have so many other problems in our community?’”

Program administrators pointed to a 2003 Annie E. Casey Foundation report that praised SUN schools’ “impact, influence, and leverage.” The foundation had helped seed the SUN program with \$575,000 over five years. Casey program researchers understood how deprivation hurts children physically, emotionally, and academically. SUN schools seemed to offer a practical solution. Still missing, however, was hard educational data.

To provide that data, administrators commissioned Education Northwest (formerly the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory), to independently evaluate the SUN program. The report, published in January 2006, described a program exceeding its goals in service delivery, and successfully targeting academic enrichment and social services to the county’s most disadvantaged students. Calling the results “promising,” the report found that 80 percent of SUN-involved students had improved their test scores in reading. In math, 75 percent had improved. More than 90 percent of the families receiving case-management services reported their problems were being addressed, with 70 percent meeting almost all their case goals.

Samolinski says the report consolidated community support for the initiative. “It gave us the credibility we needed to build the foundation and the ongoing support with our local politicians,” she says.

parents and volunteers, exchanges information with teachers, and keeps records. And it is Christiansen who nurtures the school's relationships with the dozen nonprofits that offer enrichment classes in culture, sports, and the arts.

"It takes a highly organized person like Natalie," notes Cherie Davis, SUN manager for SEI. "Somebody with a creative vision and somebody who can connect with the community regardless of income level or color."

Working closely with the principal, teachers, and school student support team, Christiansen helps identify children and families who need help from other agencies. She's the go-to person for equipment, problem solving, and help with after-school classroom management.

"Most after-school programs are crucial because parents are working until 5 or 5:30," says Davis. "It would not be good to have kids hanging out with nowhere to go. You want the students to be safe and to have opportunities."

The role of site coordinator is central to SUN. It's also one of its strongest features, says Shah. "The key, I think, is that relationship between the principal and the community schools coordinator. That person is almost a community

The SUN Service System by the Numbers

	FY2010 Funding
Case management for at-risk youth 6–17 years	2,641,191
Extended school day activities and services	4,082,401
Early childhood playgroups and parent education	1,473,829
Emergency assistance for heating and energy	13,623,355
Rent assistance and transitional housing	4,563,517
Alcohol, tobacco, and drug assessment and treatment for teens	240,845
Support for sexual minority youth	126,670
Case management and support for Latino families	480,385
Total cost of SUN services	\$27,232,193

organizer who works to lower the barriers that our kids face.

"It's a strategy, and we see sustained stakeholder buy-in where there is that person who works alongside the community. They are the glue. They are the bridge. This allows the principal to focus on academics and on the faculty. All schools across the country have programs, but what they lack is this coordination driven by results."

Tough Times Demand Strong Measures

Humboldt School's students are among the least privileged in the county, with the entire student body eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. The county average is 71 percent. About 60 percent of the student body is African

American, and about 24 percent Latino. Historically, test scores have been below the state and district average. Without intervention, research suggests these students could be destined for the bottom end of the achievement gap.

Raising achievement takes time, but research suggests the approach does work. Currently, SUN students' school attendance rate is 93 percent. Teachers report 75 percent of SUN school students show improved behavior, while 75 percent demonstrate gains in reading and 77 percent made gains in math. Of students who attended at least 30 days of SUN programming, 80 percent met or exceeded state benchmarks.

But, these figures are only part of the picture. The program also delivers impressive results in keeping students in school, helping families stay housed, and linking them to health, income support, and other social services. More than 90 percent of SUN students say they like coming to school, feel safe after school, and feel successful at SUN.

The need is not in doubt. According to figures from the U.S. Census's American Community Survey, about 17.5 percent of the state's children—or 148,000 children—live below the official 2009 poverty line of \$22,050 a year for a family of four. However, families earning up to twice the official poverty rate also struggle to meet their basic needs for housing, health care, and food. The National Center for Child Poverty estimates 40 percent of Oregon children live in low-income families. That's also the national average. With the SUN program, at least some of these children and families in the state's most populous county can feel a ray of hope. ■



SUN site coordinator Natalie Christiansen (left) and her assistant Stephanie Harvey (right) manage everything from student discipline to scheduling after-school classes.



On the first day of chess club, students practiced moving their pawns.