

Schools and Communities: Stronger Together

Randi Weingarten

President, American Federation of Teachers

The person recently selected as one of the nation's top teachers has used her bully pulpit to give the nation a window on the realities confronting students and teachers—and to ask for help.

"In any school system in any state, you have families in crisis right now," National Teacher of the Year Rebecca Mieliwocki told the Washington Post. "I can do everything I can when [students] step into my classroom to try to level the playing field, but one person alone just can't do it all. ... It's all hands on deck right now to get through this."

Numerous school systems are adopting this "all hands on deck" approach by starting community schools—with impressive results. Community schools are neighborhood public schools that meet students' academic, enrichment, social and health needs by coordinating partners and resources. Using the school as a hub for needed services and supports, community schools connect the school, students, families and the neighborhood.

The supports and opportunities available at community schools can include academic and enrichment programs before and after school and during the summer, medical and mental health services, food assistance, mentoring, internships, college counseling and a variety of social services.

The benefits of successful community schools include improved attendance and academic achievement, higher graduation rates and rates of matriculation to postsecondary education, increased family engagement, and healthier students. Two districtwide efforts supported by the local teachers unions show the potential of this approach.

In Cincinnati, every public school is a community learning center (CLC), serving as a central location for students and families to access services. Since adopting the CLC approach in 2001, Cincinnati has become the highest-performing urban district in Ohio. High school graduation rates climbed from 51 percent in 2000 to 81.9 percent in 2010. Achievement gaps between African-American and white students narrowed from 14.5 percent in 2003 to 1.2 percent in 2010. And

enrollment is up significantly in Cincinnati schools, including the return of middle-class families to the district.

An organization called Say Yes to Education offers the promise of college scholarships to students in six cities, and works back from there—providing the academic, health, social, family and legal supports students need to achieve the goal of attending college. In 2009, Say Yes launched a citywide program for all students in Syracuse, N.Y. Already, Say Yes Syracuse has raised or leveraged more than \$43 million for scholarships and services, helping nearly 2,000 students enroll in college. Thirty-one percent more ninth-grade students passed algebra Regents exams in 2010 than in 2009. More children are staying in school: The number of students leaving after ninth grade decreased by 44 percent from 2009 to 2010. And the benefits extend beyond

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schools and students. Syracuse home values have risen 3.5 percent since 2009, and crime is down by 7 percent, both of which have been attributed at least in part to the success of Say Yes.

Community schools create an environment where everyone can do their best—kids are better able to learn, and teachers can focus more on instruction, knowing their students' needs are being met.

Karl Logan, the principal of a SUN Community School in Multnomah County, Ore., says that in the absence of the social, emotional and physical supports that community schools provide students, "teachers will fill that void, because that's just what they do." When students have ready access to such services, teachers are able to teach.

In this era of ongoing budget austerity, many community schools have proven to be an efficient and effective way to provide much-needed services. A recent study by the Coalition for Community Schools found that, on average, districts leverage \$3 from community partners for every dollar they allocate. Coordinating service delivery can help eliminate both harmful gaps and costly duplication of services.

It's time to stop ignoring poverty and the realities that disadvantaged students face. We must instead address the factors that can and do impede student achievement and well-being. At a time when some "leaders" seek to hold others accountable for struggling schools but shirk their own responsibilities, the community schools strategy offers a constructive model of shared responsibility and effective solutions. Let's see more leaders help more communities benefit from this approach.



Weingarten visits Ethel M. Taylor Academy in Cincinnati.

Bruce Crippen