



Community Schools 'Harnessing the Power of Parents'

By Larry Gavin
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At an Oct. 14 forum, a panel discussed efforts to develop parent leadership and empower parents in two community schools being piloted by Youth Organization Umbrella (Y.O.U.), one at Chute Middle School in partnership with School District 65 and McGaw Y, and the second at Lincoln Junior High School in Skokie in partnership with School District 69.

“The biggest focus is parent leadership development so long-term priorities can emerge from a more representative group of the school community,” said Melissa Carpenter, a panel member and community schools director at Y.O.U. “That will move us toward a longer-term plan for what each school will focus the most on in the community school work.”

Paul Goren, a panel member and superintendent of District 65, said he welcomed parent and community engagement, which he said is an essential part of school success.

Community Schools

Community schools are being established across the nation. The lack of progress in addressing the achievement gap has led many scholars, educators and parents to advocate for a more holistic approach to address the needs of students from low-income households. They posit that providing a network of services at a school can improve student health, reduce impediments to student learning, increase student engagement, open doors to parental involvement, provide a more supportive environment for learning and create conditions for high student achievement.

“There are tons of resources across our community and the needle isn’t moving,” said Ms. Carpenter. She said Y.O.U. decided to take the approach, “We’re going to look at community schools as a community change initiative.”

Y.O.U. received grants from United Way of Metropolitan Chicago to assist in establishing the pilots at Chute and Lincoln. Jeanette Castellanos Butt, a panel member and vice president of United Way, said about 40% of United Way’s resources are now invested in community schools.

“The community school model is a model where schools and non-profit organizations and in some instances businesses come together to provide a broad range of programs and services to students and their families to support comprehensive learning and development,” said Ms. Butt.

“The key marker of a community school is collaboration,” she added. “It is the notion that a community school can serve as a critical hub for a community and be a link to critical services not only for students but for their families. Conversely, the community will have the opportunity to engage in the school in a more positive way.”

She said three components make up a good community school. First, she said, a community school provides education, social and emotional supports that assist in reaching student achievement. “This goes beyond traditional after-school projects to a model where you have at least one staff person who is helping to coordinate all of those resources and to align those resources to what’s going on in the school.”

Second, she said, a community school provides “comprehensive support in health and wellness,” including not only physical, but also mental health.

Third, she said, “The best community schools really have a robust model for engaging parents and community members as leaders with what is going on in that community and in that school.”

“We know that children’s academic success does not happen in a vacuum. In order for it to happen, we need to have the social supports, the emotional supports, the health supports, that families have the income supports they really need to be able to wrap around that individual student, so that the student and that family can be as successful as possible.”

Y.O.U. has been offering its after-school program at Chute and at Lincoln for many years. Y.O.U. has provided academic and enrichment programs, mentoring, and counseling services. The community school model takes it to another level.

Ms. Carpenter said the two pilots have been focusing on three things. First they are adding services that address immediate needs. Second, they are providing infrastructure and alignment work that coordinates and brings together existing services at the school. Third, they are building parent leadership.

The Short- and the Long-Term

The community school pilots have been addressing some immediate needs. For example, Ms. Carpenter said, at Chute they provide vision testing and eyeglasses for students in partnership with local optometrists. In addition, she said, they will continue a holiday food and gift program; and they are looking at where there may be physical and mental health gaps that might be addressed.

At Lincoln, a lot of kids were not able to participate in sports programs because they did not have physicals and immunizations. Erin Moore, a panel member and Y.O.U.’s community school manager at Lincoln, said they arranged for Advocate Children Hospital’s Care Mobile to come to the school and provide these services. They have also provided a dental clinic on site, and interpretation services at parent/teacher meetings.

While the community schools are providing concrete services, Ms. Carpenter said, the real focus is to develop parent leadership, which she sees as a way to really shift the paradigm. The goal is to develop parent leadership so parents identify the community’s needs and decide how to address those needs.

She said this was important “so whatever needs assessment gets done and whatever program gets developed, it’s really something that the families own. It’s really for and about the families and the community.”

“For us,” she said, “It’s as simple as ‘Families know best what families need.’”

The COFI Model

The pilots are developing parent leadership using the COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues) model. COFI has 16 years’ experience and has demonstrated success, said Ms. Carpenter.

Under the COFI model, there are three phases, described generally as Phase One – self, family and team and team building; Phase Two – community outreach and action; and Phase Three – planning to sustain and ongoing organizing.

At the Chute pilot, 11 parents from Dawes, Oakton and Chute schools completed the parent leadership training provided by COFI in the 2013-14 school year. The parents, who call themselves “Parents on a Mission” (POM), were trained to set personal goals, how to build a web of supports to achieve those goals, and how to translate that into building goals for the community and solutions to achieve those goals. As a team-building exercise, POM sponsored a family night at Chute to promote healthy eating and nutritional meals.

Seven members of POM are continuing to meet regularly, Ms. Carpenter told the RoundTable, and they are moving forward in Phase II of COFI’s model. They are about to reach out to the community through some door-knocking, talking to other parents at Chute and feeder-school events, and through a written survey.

Half of the outreach is to gather information and half to make connections, said Ms. Carpenter. During the outreach, members of POM may talk about what they see as the issues, find out who might want to work with them on those issues, and learn what other parents see as the issues.

Ms. Carpenter said the outreach phase usually generates excitement and “we expect [the number of parents] to grow from here.”

A second cohort of Chute parents is scheduled to go through training in January, but this time a member of POM will do the training. Ms. Carpenter said she hopes that by the end of this school year, that POM will have identified specific goals and formed action teams to work on achieving those goals.

At Lincoln, 20 parents, called “Parent Leaders Uniting Skokie” (PLUS), have completed COFI’s Phase One training; and they have also recently completed their community outreach to gather input from parents through a written survey, discussions with parents at school events and interviews with community leaders, said Ms. Moore. The PLUS team is scheduled to meet on Oct. 25 to identify one of two issues that they would like to focus on.

Subia Javed, a panelist and parent member of PLUS, said there will then be a community meeting in November at which members of PLUS will talk with other parents and invite them to join them in working on the issues. In addition, a second cohort of parents will be provided training under the COFI model, this time by a member of PLAN.

Graciela Suarez, a panelist and a lead organizer for COFI, said she went through COFI's training program several years ago. She said, "It opened my eyes. To me it is a life changer."

How the Community School Model Meshes With the Schools

Dr. Goren said seminal research conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago (including Evanston resident Penny Sebring) demonstrates there are five essential components for school success: ambitious instruction, effective leaders, collaborative teachers, a student-centered learning climate, and involved families.

"Parent engagement and the broader community engagement is an essential part of school success," Dr. Goren said. "But we can't do it alone. And that's not an excuse. ... We need help on things like before- and after-school programs. We need help on summer programs. We need help on engagement of parents beyond what we do during the school day or even in the very important but traditional PTA role. We really want parents involved in the fabric of the school."

He said community schools offer opportunities for engaging parents, mentoring students, and providing a wide range of social, health-care and mental health supports.

"The piece that's important to me as a superintendent and then as a 16-year resident of Evanston is true ownership of the schools. In true ownership of the schools, we are wonderfully entrusted to make schools and the school setting better than it can always be and keep striving for the top for all kids and for all families."

By opening the doors to parents and guardians, to social agencies like Y.O.U, the McGaw Y, the YWCA, the Youth Job Center, Family Focus and others and with the help of United Way, we "will make our schools a better place and will make all of us who are educators, better educators, and for that I am extremely grateful," he said.

When asked if the community school model would expand to other schools, Dr. Goren said, "The will and intent would be to expand if we have programs and models that are actually working."

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