Community Schools as an Effective Strategy for Reform

By Julia Daniel with Jon Snyder

Community schools show significant promise for addressing barriers to learning and promoting well-being in students and communities (Blank, Jacobson & Pearson, 2009). As with much of educational research, the research on community schools is contested terrain because of multiple models, issues of quality, and lack of a consensus on the definition of a *community school*. There is, however, research literature on the various agreed-upon features of a community school, such as extended time, integrated supports, and family and community engagement. That research literature finds that community school models provide an excellent social return on investments. This brief summarizes the empirical basis for several features of community schools.

Research on Effectiveness

Compared with schools that do not follow the community school model, successful community schools across the United States have reported students achieving higher math and reading proficiency and increases in graduation and college going rates (Coalition for Community Schools, 2010). Community schools that commit to a vision for developing comprehensive school–family–community collaborations have the greatest potential to address the needs of the whole child in ways that strengthen families, schools, and neighborhoods (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2011). These models develop systems of collaborative governance and accountability to assess their success in achieving their goals, and create reciprocal accountability that holds districts and states accountable for providing equitable resources to make these schools work, as well as reducing problematic student behavior and violence, and increasing in parental involvement (Dryfoos, 2000).

In addition, research suggests that community schools that establish and maintain collaborative systems in which community stakeholders share governance and build comprehensive, multifaceted, cohesive systems of interventions can improve conditions and address issues for students, families, schools, and communities (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2011). Wraparound services—including health, mental, and dental care; English as a Second Language; adult literacy classes for parents and community members; job training; and after-school expanded learning time—can be effective in promoting student achievement (Castrechini & London, 2012).

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Collaborating with community stakeholders promotes student learning and improves family engagement and neighborhood conditions (Blank, Melaville & Shah, 2003). One study found that community schools tend to outperform matched non-community schools in graduation rates and have lower dropout rates (ICF International, 2010). In Cincinnati, Ohio, one community school graduated more students in 3 years after it joined a districtwide community schools initiative than it had in the previous 85 years (Blank, Jacobsen & Melville, 2012). In Tulsa, Oklahoma, community schools outperformed non-community schools on the state math test by 32 points and on the state reading test by 19 points (Adams, 2010). When communities and schools build successful partnerships in community schools, students and families benefit.

Extended Time

Because learning opportunities are not currently equitably distributed, students from low-income backgrounds tend to have the fewest resources available to them (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2014), serving to widen the achievement gap (Del Razo & Renée, 2013). In order to prepare students for college, careers, and life, schools should take advantage of the resources of the whole community to support and align high quality and engaging learning both inside and outside of schools (Del Razo

& Renée, 2013). The evidence suggests that expanding school time can help address the opportunity gap if it creates more engaged time in academic classes, such that students are able to have broader and deeper interactions with the curricula, coupled with more individualized learning support (Farbman, 2015). Additionally, more time devoted to enrichment classes and activities can boost student engagement in schools and broaden their educational experiences (Farbman, 2015).

Integrated Supports

Integrated supports for students coordinate and integrate resources in schools to target barriers to achievement, such as lack of tutoring, mentoring, physical and mental health care, and family support. Emerging evidence suggests that such supports can contribute to student academic progress as measured by lower grade retention and dropout rates, and increases in attendance and math, reading, and ELA achievement (Anderson & Emig, 2014). Research clearly shows that a comprehensive set of supports to support the whole child increases the likelihood of academic success, particularly for disadvantaged students (Anderson & Emig, 2014; Basch, 2010; Vinciullo & Bradley, 2009).

Family and Community Engagement

Research strongly documents that family engagement in school affairs is linked to positive student outcomes (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001) found that urban school systems that engaged civic alliances from the entire community in efforts to address educational needs were able to build and sustain substantial improvements. Schools that have high levels of relational trust among principals, teachers, parents, and local community leaders also show a greater capacity to reform themselves and improve practices (Bryck & Schneider, 2002), thus growing strong, mutually beneficial relationships between schools and the communities in which they reside (Warren, 2001; Noguera, 2001).
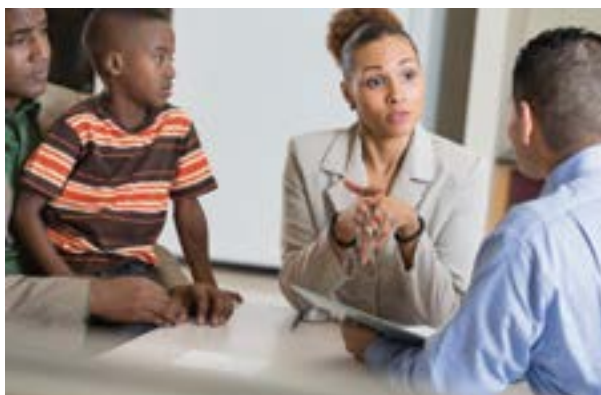
Community schools' level of success depends partly on their larger communities' capacity to collaborate as partners with power (Warren, 2005). Communities that are organized such that local residents together build power to demand what they need are often able to contribute to school-level improvements and improved student achievements, according to a study by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (Mediratta et al. 2008). Districts and schools that engage with organized communities help increase civic capacity that improves the quality of schools and supports students socially, academically, and in other ways.

Community schools are in an advantageous position because they can continually engage families through various access points by having their staff refer students to opportunities and broaden engagement (Castrechini & London, 2012). Using peer-to-peer parent engagement and providing opportunities for parent input in decision-making can help improve parental leadership at school (Mapp & Hong, 2009). When communities grow in power and engage with community schools in partnerships, children can better achieve and communities can grow stronger.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

While there is not yet extensive research on the fiscal benefits of community schools, the existing research points to an excellent return in social value on investments into schools providing wraparound services. Communities In Schools conducted a 5-year rigorous study

of their high school affiliates, finding that every $1 invested created $11.60 in economic benefits as the model increases graduation rates and decreases dropout rates. These benefits include higher earnings for students who progress through high school and graduate, as well as taxpayer savings created by such increased academic achievement. The study estimates that students collectively served by the programs will have expected increases in their family income by $63 million annually, and social savings due to reductions in smoking, alcoholism, crime, welfare, and unemployment costs will total $154.5 million (Economic Modeling Specialists Inc., 2012).

Similarly, Children's Aid Society programs conducted an analysis of two elementary schools providing comprehensive programs with expanded learning opportunities, health and mental health services, parent education and engagement, and other family support services. They found that an investment of $1 in those schools delivered $10.30 at one school and $14.80 at the other in social value as a return. Social value is calculated based on important outcomes for children's success, including cognitive and literary skills (Martinez & Hayes, 2013).

Investing in programs that address the multiple needs of students and communities so that children can succeed in school produces excellent returns for individuals and for society. We all benefit when schools are able to provide wraparound services, enriching and challenging curriculum taught by highly qualified and culturally sensitive teachers, and meaningful mechanisms for parents to engage and participate at all levels of the school.

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