



Are Community Schools the Key to Fixing Education?

This holistic approach responds to the needs of each individual community.

By Thomas MacMillan

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Walking down a hallway of Chicago’s South Loop Elementary School, Melissa Mitchell heard a first grader unleash a string of profanities inside a classroom.

“I hear this little voice screaming every curse word I’ve ever heard,” Mitchell says. She looked inside and saw “teeny, teeny” Brianne, standing on top of a desk.

“I’m not going to do this — every word you can think of — spelling test!” the little girl screamed, Mitchell recalls.

At most schools, Brianne would’ve ended up in the principal’s office for discipline. But South Loop is a community school that includes a variety of social services for kids and parents — from medical care and counseling to food pantries and adult GED classes. These facilities, which are gaining in popularity, are based on the idea that no matter how great a teacher is or how many high-tech gadgets a classroom has, kids can’t learn if they’re struggling with challenges at home (think: unemployed parents, a lack of food, the threat of eviction).

Instead of being sent to the principal, Brianne ended up in Mitchell’s office. As the school resource coordinator, Mitchell is in charge of determining what social supports the South Loop community needs and finding ways to meet them.

Mitchell learned that Brianne wasn’t simply being a brat. The little girl’s parents were going through an acrimonious separation, creating an unstable environment at home. At six years of age, Brianne didn’t understand everything that was happening; nevertheless, it was upsetting her and spilling over into the school day.

After identifying the source of the behavior problem, Mitchell worked with Brianne’s family to address some of the trouble at home. She helped the mother find stable housing and childcare subsidies and connected Brianne and her family to a counselor.

While the community school model that helped Brianne and her family has been around for years — maybe over a century — it’s recently been gathering steam as more and more educators and elected officials see the value of a holistic approach to education reform.

Advocates currently estimate that as many as 5,000 community schools exist in the U.S., with more on the way.

Last year, Michigan's Republican Gov. Rick Snyder expanded a program placing social workers in schools — a step toward community schools. In June, Democratic Mayor Bill De Blasio announced plans to spend \$52 million to open 40 community schools in New York City. And in July, Maryland U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer and Illinois U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock introduced a bipartisan bill that would establish a grant program to create more community schools nationwide.

A strategy, not a program

Each of the community schools created by these efforts will look different. That's because their underlying philosophy holds that each one should grow and develop in response to the needs of the community it's in, not according to some pre-ordained plan.

"It's a strategy, not a program," says Jane Quinn, Director of the National Center for Community Schools, part of the Children's Aid Society.

Community schools each do a comprehensive needs assessment to determine what supports are most needed and often end up with school-based health clinics to address student's physical, mental and dental health needs, including vision-correction to make sure kids that can see the lessons on the chalkboard.

There's a lot of evidence that wealthy kids succeed partly because they can take advantage of "out of school enrichment," Quinn says. Community schools can level the playing field with an extended school day and more academic and extra-curricular offerings outside of the traditional school day.

At Earle STEM Academy in Chicago's impoverished Englewood neighborhood, program supervisor Quintella Rodgers says that after-school activities include a job club that teaches financial literacy, a power group that focuses on social and emotional health and individual academic help, plus photography, karate, Pilates, volleyball, basketball and DJing classes.

For the whole family

In community schools, "the primary allegiance is to the kids in the schools," said Sarah Zeller-Berkman, who works for Youth Development Institute, which runs Beacon Community Schools in New York City. "But they still need and want to serve the broader community." One way they accomplish this is by offering programs for parents and finding ways to integrate them into the school.

Community schools offer extra programming by creating partnerships with existing organizations, like colleges offering classes or not-for-profits running mentoring programs. The

social services offered in community schools don't usually duplicate ongoing efforts, but seek to bring them together under one roof.

At Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, a Children's Aid Society community school in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood, for example, the additional services offered include a variety of classes and programs for parents.

On a recent tour of the building, Director Migdalia Cortes-Torres pointed out photographs depicting some recent grads, resplendent in caps and gowns, on a bulletin board outside the school's health clinic. But they weren't pictures of students who had finished high school or junior high; they were pictures of students' parents who had received their GEDs through a program at the school.

In addition to the GED program, Cortes-Torres said the school, which serves a largely Dominican population, offers classes for parents in nutrition and cooking, child development, English language and computer skills. They can learn art history, go on poetry retreats and even travel internationally with other parents.

Lidia Aguasanta, the school's parent coordinator, says that she's been helping parents to not only get their high-school diplomas, but to go for college degrees as well. "I do trips with them" to local universities because, she says, "they're scared to leave the community" and are intimidated by the complicated process of enrolling in college since many don't speak English.

In community schools, support for parents help students achieve success, too. Aguasanta recalls a struggling mom that she convinced to enroll at Boricua College in New York City. The woman is now thriving and the simple fact that she's now pursuing higher ed makes it more likely that her daughter, a 7th grader at the school, will too, Aguasanta says.

Studies indicate success

Beyond anecdotes like this one, research studies are pointing to hard evidence that community schools can reduce absenteeism and dropout levels and improve grades and test scores.

Not everybody is sold on community schools, however. Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, tells the Wall Street Journal that the model needs more study before people invest in it on a large scale. And the New York Times reported last year that while the creation of community schools in Cincinnati has led to some improvements, many of the schools "are still in dire academic straits."

Nevertheless, staunch opposition to the model is rare. "Community schools have no natural enemies," says Quinn, quoting Martin Blank, head of the Coalition for Community Schools. Instructors, including those that belong to the American Federation of Teachers, like community schools because they can focus on teaching, not on whether their students are hungry or in trouble at home.

There are, however, “rival hypotheses” about where school resources should go, Quinn says. Some people believe, for instance, that the key to improving education is high-quality teaching and that anything else is just a distraction.

Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach For America, has dedicated decades to putting new young teachers in schools, based partly on the idea that better teaching is central to better education. But, she also voices support for the principals of community schools.

“All the successful schools . . . are taking a community approach,” she said at a recent NationSwell event. It’s important that schools are responsive to people on the ground, not to theorists with big fix-all theories. “You need to empower people at the local level.”

At South Loop Elementary, where locals can address education holistically, Melissa Mitchell’s response to Brianne’s profanity-laced tantrum worked.

“It wasn’t a perfect rainbows and butterflies outcome,” says Mitchell, who’s now the head of Illinois’ Federation For Community Schools. But Brianne did settle down and “the father and mother came to a reasonable custody agreement.”

Leaving Brianne with a little less on her mind and giving her the ability to focus on what she was really in school for: Learning.