

Community Perspective

The Carver Park Story: Safe Affordable Housing Equals Student Achievement

By Deb Drysdale Elias, Principal

George Washington Carver Elementary School, Yuma, AZ

When I first started as the Principal of George Washington Carver Elementary School in 1992, the neighborhood was a very different place. Gangs, graffiti, and violence defined and dominated the Carver Park community. Children rarely played in the park across the street, families did not picnic there. From my office window, I witnessed drug deals taking place at park benches and had a clear view of the dealers' houses less than a hundred paces from the school.

Today, at the very spot where the drug deals went down, there's a beautiful fountain adorned with metal animal and tree shapes that children can play in during Yuma's hot summer months. The park is filled with families and activities – it's a safe place for the whole community. The drug houses that I once observed from my window have been replaced with family-oriented single-family homes.

The change is remarkable—in five years, the neighborhood went from “blighted” to delightful. Drive through Carver Park today and you will see an 80-unit apartment building, 36 townhouses, 50 new homes on sites where only trouble existed before, and 60 rehabilitated homes, all of which provide safe and affordable housing for working families in Yuma. Carver School has a new building to replace the old, termite-infested structure, and the showcase Martin Luther King Community Center provides a home for teenagers, community events, and office space for non-profits.

The City of Yuma identified the Carver Park Neighborhood as an area for comprehensive revitalization in 2000 and worked with residents to design the Carver Park Revitalization Plan. But it took the work of every organization and family in the community to make the plan a reality. From the Arizona Department of Housing and HUD to the local Boys and Girls Club and Police Department to private investors and financial institutions, each played a vital role in addressing the multiple problems that exist in a community with a poverty rate of almost 50 percent. We tackled crime by implementing a community policing program and investing in street lights, and became an official Weed and Seed neighborhood site. We worked to bring new supportive youth, family, and elderly services into the neighborhood, such as domestic violence prevention, citizenship assistance, and summer jobs and job training for young adults. To date a total of \$27.5 million has been leveraged for neighborhood revitalization, an impressive mix of federal, local and private dollars.

Carver School's contribution to the revitalization was exceedingly important. As a landmark structure in the neighborhood, the school became the center and symbol of the revitalization. The school, a familiar and safe haven for our families, hosted community meetings, advisory board meetings, planning sessions, and became a point of contact and display point for survey results, minutes and agendas. An oversight board was created to ensure that the Revitalization Plan met the needs of the residents and the neighborhood. Among the charter members of the board were the school principal and two parents from the school. It was clear from the beginning that neighborhood revitalization and education were solid cornerstones for this plan's success.

As the Principal of the local school, the revitalization of the neighborhood may not be part of my official job description. But I have made it a priority. I know that by providing affordable housing in a safe and stable neighborhood only good things—better attendance and retention, less violence, less vandalism—would result at the school. Has it made a difference in our test scores? You bet! In the last five years, 98 percent of Carver's kindergarteners have achieved grade level standards in reading and writing. This is even more impressive when you consider that 75 percent of incoming kindergarteners speak no English. Students now enter my school from a point of strength and confidence that is bestowed upon them from the power of the neighborhood.

I encourage those committed to community development to embrace the little neighborhood school as you plan and design needed change. And I urge you to behave tirelessly as you seek to provide the incentives, grants, initiatives, tax credits and waivers that promote the kind of partnerships that created the miracle of the Carver Park story.



Yuma's new Stewart Vincent Wolfe Creative Playground – Built in 10 days entirely by volunteers (over 8,000 community members participated), the playground was designed with input from local school children.