



Schools Uniting Neighborhoods:

Community Schools Anchoring Local Change

By Diana Hall, Multnomah County

Across the United States, communities are thinking differently about the challenges they face to achieving community prosperity and health. Increasingly, youth educational success is being recognized as a cornerstone for the attainment of a wide array of key outcomes including poverty reduction and improvements in physical and mental health, public safety and community vitality.

In Multnomah County, Oregon, which includes the City of Portland and is home to roughly 750,000 people, the community has made youth educational achievement a priority, and has developed an innovative and highly successful model for cross-sector collaboration. The partnership, known as SUN Community Schools, brings together schools and partners from across the community to collectively impact educational success and family self-sufficiency.

Recognizing the need for support at all ages and attention to transitions in and out of the K-12 system, as well as between grade levels, SUN Community Schools are located in elementary, K-8, middle and high schools. The focus is on the whole child, integrating academics, social services, supports and opportunities in order to meet student and family needs. The specific services and programs offered are tailored to the individual assets and needs of a school, and community resources are organized strategically to support student success. This article describes SUN's community school approach and highlights emerging opportunities for the community development field to work in closer partnership with schools.

Schools as Centers of the Community

While many public schools offer before- and after-school activities, Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN)

goes much further by reinventing the school as a place that addresses the full spectrum of family needs. On a typical day, the school opens early, providing students with a safe place to eat breakfast, do homework or participate in recreational and skill-building activities. During the school day, a community school site manager is working with school staff, families and community partners to identify specific student and family needs and broker services, and develop innovative partnerships that bring critical child and family supports directly to campus. Families and community members come to the school for advisory committee and leadership activities, parenting classes, health supports, food, clothing, and access to anti-poverty, mental health, and other social services.

The day does not end with the school bell. Instead, the extended-day program picks up where the traditional classroom leaves off, providing students with an array of academic, enrichment and recreational activities that complement and build on the school day. Students receive a full dinner and engage in physical activity to improve their physical health. In the evening the school serves as a community center offering a variety of educational and recreational activities for adults and youth as well as providing space for community projects and meetings. This is SUN carrying out the vision its name so clearly describes, truly using schools to unite neighborhoods.

Rooted in Collaboration

In the late 1990s, Multnomah County community members and leaders recognized a need for a new approach. The environment posed multiple challenges including shrinking budgets, a significant racial achievement gap, growing poverty, a severe shortage of affordable housing, and an increase in the number of children being left unsupervised during out-of-school hours. Demographic changes were dramatically increasing the cultural and linguistic diversity in the region, requiring schools and social service organizations to develop new skills in order to educate and support these populations effectively.

An individual's level of educational attainment is the primary predictor of poverty in adulthood. The effect of family poverty on school success was also clear, as barriers such as homelessness, mobility, hunger, illness, and trauma made it impossible for many students to come to school ready to learn. It became clear that you couldn't talk about alleviating or eliminating poverty without talking about education.

With leadership from elected officials in the City of Portland and Multnomah County, the decision was made to partner together to support schools. The initial goal was two-fold: (1) to support education and school success and (2) to improve the way resources for students and their families were delivered by developing a school-

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based delivery model. An ad hoc committee of a broad array of stakeholders was convened to determine the best strategy to accomplish this goal. The committee included leadership from an existing Community Building Initiative and After School Cabinet. After a year of research and deliberation, the full-service community school model was chosen and the first eight SUN Community Schools were implemented in the fall of 1999, with the city and county providing core funding.

Since that time, the community has chosen to expand SUN Community Schools from 8 to 67 schools with a vision for every school to be a SUN Community School. Supportive policy has been adopted in the county, city and school districts and a more expansive network of care, named the SUN Service System, has been developed to organize and prioritize the county's investments and partnerships to support school age children and their families.

Community Schools as a Place-Based Strategy

A SUN Community School is not a program, but rather a place and support hub where schools and communities work together to have a collective impact on the success of children and families and provide a comprehensive array of services. The strategy reflects the unique needs of each school and its neighborhood. Schools are ideal locations for these focused efforts, both because they are the most direct and convenient route for reaching students and families, but also because, in the majority of neighborhoods most impacted by poverty and low student achievement, schools are the only public facilities.

SUN Community Schools also serve as a platform for implementing other place-based education reform initiatives, such as Cradle to Career. In recent years, Portland and Multnomah County leaders have been building a Cradle to Career (C2C) framework adapted from the Strive model in Cincinnati, Ohio (see the article "The New Civic Infrastructure" in this issue for more information). Portland is one of seven national demonstration sites for the Strive Network's C2C Initiative. Leaders see SUN as a core strategy for the local C2C initiative and SUN is aligned with the evolving C2C structure. Many of SUN's community and school leaders serve on C2C governance, planning and action committees, such as the C2C.

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The SUN Model

As full-service neighborhood hubs, where school and community partners work together to ensure kids and families have what they need to succeed, SUN Community Schools serve as the vehicle to link community institutions, such as libraries, parks, community centers, neighborhood health clinics and area churches and businesses.

At the school site, SUN Community Schools mobilize and strategically organize community resources to provide:

- Strong core instructional program;
- Educational support and skill development for youth and adults;
- Enrichment and recreation activities;
- Family involvement and support;
- Social, health and mental health resources;
- Family and community events.

In the SUN model, a non-educational lead agency partners with an individual school and together, with help from school and community leaders, they co-manage the community school collaboration at the site. The inclusion of non-profit partners in the role of lead agency capitalizes on the unique capacity of these community-based organizations. That capacity includes expertise in anti-poverty services, youth and family engagement and community development fields; relationships and standing within communities and with community leaders; and the ability to fund- and “friend”-raise in ways that governments and educational agencies cannot. Lead agencies receive core funding that supports the hiring of a SUN Community School site manager as well as limited flexible dollars to fill resource gaps in key underfunded services.

The use of site managers is an essential component of the SUN model. Site managers coordinate and broker services at the school and support the development of the partnerships and collaboration between the school and its youth, families and community. Effectively, they act as the “glue” to attach all the community resources – from public services to neighborhood volunteers – to the school in a strategic way. It is critical to have a dedicated person with the capacity, in both time and skills, to carry out these

functions. SUN has learned that absent such a position, schools and communities are unable to develop or sustain such strategic collective efforts and thus, unable to make a significant impact.

In addition to site management, or coordination as it is called in many other community schools initiatives across the country, there are four other defining components to the SUN model at the site level. The first is that the array of services and programs provided to youth and adults includes offerings from academics and skill development to social, health and mental health services to enrichment and recreation. Second, services are planned, developed and implemented within the context of youth, family and community engagement. Engagement is a way of doing business and building relationships to form the SUN collaboration, rather than a service or activity offered to the community. Authentic engagement helps ensure that what happens in the SUN sites is culturally appropriate, relevant and targeted at the issues most affecting student and family success. District and school support, particularly that of the school principal, is the third essential ingredient in ensuring the connection of supports with educational success and in influencing school reform.

Lastly, SUN’s model calls out an important element for developing true collaboration: shared leadership and accountability. At the school site, the principal and the community school site manager share leadership across the school day and the out-of-school time. Principals often refer to the site manager as an assistant principal. A broad group of stakeholders participate in advisory and leadership roles using an annual planning process that is aligned with the school improvement plan. Progress and results are documented and shared with the community.

Community-Level Collaboration

SUN is a multi-jurisdictional partnership and its sponsoring partners each see the community schools strategy as advancing their core mission. Community schools are a vehicle for everyone to get their work done - whether that work is education, crime prevention, anti-poverty, community and economic revitalization, workforce development or other community-focused efforts. SUN sponsors have understood from the beginning that none of the organizations can accomplish their missions by working alone. This understanding has become all the clearer to SUN’s partners, as economic realities have worsened at the same time that expectations of the organizations providing services, particularly educational institutions, have continued to grow.

SUN sponsors share responsibility and investment in the community schools model. Shared governance and accountability happen through the SUN Service System Coordinating Council, which has representation from

the city, county, six school districts, the State of Oregon, the Coalition of Communities of Color, the Commission on Children, Family and Community, the Cradle to Career backbone organization, business, non-profit providers and youth. The county, city (including a local levy for children's services) and school districts contribute \$7 million annually to fund the core functions of SUN at the 67 sites. That contribution then leverages and attracts approximately \$17 million in other resources to those local communities. In the broader SUN Service System, over \$30 million in additional service funding is aligned and delivered through SUN Community Schools and regional school-linked centers.

Historically, the connections between SUN Community Schools and local community development have been limited to planning and development efforts supported by the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and local community development organizations in discrete neighborhoods. More recently, however, the City's planning process and resulting Portland Plan, which lays out the roadmap for the next 30 years, heavily involved SUN partners and called out SUN in all three integrated strategy areas: (1) Thriving Educated Youth, (2) Economic Prosperity and Affordability, and (3) Healthy Connected City. Emphasizing the ability of the community schools model to create more efficient and effective change through alignment and partnership, the Plan includes the transformation of every school into a SUN Community School as a specific action.

The Impact of Collective Efforts

Educational success and self-sufficiency are inherently issues of equity, and the SUN effort is recognized as a strategy for achieving equity. One aspect of SUN's success is the degree to which the children, youth and families most affected by disparities (people of color and those living in poverty) are served and included in its efforts. SUN Community Schools consistently serve the most vulnerable kids and families and are structured to ensure that individual student and family needs are identified and met through the coordination of services. In 2010-11, of the 19,127 children and youth served in enrolled services, 80 percent qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch, 70 percent were children of color and 21 percent were English Language Learners. These rates compare to the surrounding districts' rates of 54 percent, 46 percent and 14 percent respectively.

By coming together, the community is supporting these vulnerable students and families in a significant way. Annual evaluations conducted by Multnomah County using school district, teacher and student data demonstrate the consistent effect of SUN. In the 2010-11 school year, regularly participating students showed strong results in academics, attendance and behavioral areas including:



- 74 percent of students met state benchmarks or growth target in Reading;
- Students' average benchmark gains were equal to or higher than expected in the majority of grades;
- Average daily school attendance was 94.5 percent;
- 74 percent of students improved in at least one behavioral or academic area (such as behaving well in class, motivation to learn, or homework completion); and
- 86 percent of students reported having at least one adult who cares about them and to whom they can go for help.

In addition, 96 percent of families who receive anti-poverty case management, life and job skills services, rent assistance and other basic needs support remained in permanent housing after support ended. The community also reports improvement in other related indicators including parent involvement, community safety and vibrancy.

Evolving in an Environment of Continuous Change and Learning

The SUN model is built on a strong history of community involvement and school partnerships in the region. Multnomah County and the City of Portland each had a history of investing in services delivered by community-based non-profit organizations in local schools. Implementation of SUN drew on successful existing programs and initiatives and was done without new money. What the SUN initiative learned from this experience was that it is possible to create systems change and develop a new model by drawing on existing resources. In fact, declining budgets forced institutions to reconsider how they could work more efficiently and effectively, and capitalize on partners to achieve their goals. It also became clear that while new money might become available, usually through time-limited grants, the community had large amounts of funding in existing systems already dedicated to serving youth and families. Due to their size and sustainability, it is those resources that offer the greatest possibility for fostering community-wide change, if they can be evaluated and redeployed in innovative ways.

Systems change requires patience, persistence, and the ability to exhibit flexibility and teamwork—unsurprisingly, the same skills we seek to foster in young people. Flexibility and adaptability are also essential aspects of the community school model, which make it well suited for supporting other initiatives, whether place-based or issue-focused.

Lastly, SUN's experience highlights that it takes capacity to build capacity. Its success in building a highly-functioning collaboration and system of care has required the dedication of both financial and human resources. Funding is dedicated for a small staff that carries out intermediary functions for the multi-jurisdictional partnership, including convening, planning, policy development, contract management, program development, evaluation, technical assistance and professional development. In addition, school districts and other sponsoring partners commit the time of leaders, designated liaisons and other staff to support shared governance and alignment within their home organizations.

Implications for the Community Development Field

The community schools strategy offers a tremendous opportunity for the community development sector to

impact educational achievement without moving outside its expertise or getting derailed by the daunting world of education reform. Community schools can assist community development in achieving the inclusive and multifaceted interventions necessary to address the complexities that exist in communities impacted by the intertwined issues of poverty, place and racism.

There are a variety of ways that community development entities can partner with community schools and take advantage of the infrastructure, relationships and leveraged resources they offer. One key way is to promote and support the inclusion of community schools as a strategy in other place-based initiatives, such as Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, and Enterprise Zones, among others. Many traditional community development initiatives can be offered as part of community school efforts or partnered with community schools to have an amplifying effect. Stable, affordable housing and individual savings accounts are two examples of such initiatives.

Community development professionals can also support education and community schools in a more systemic way by contributing their expertise and social capital to collaborative projects, particularly their relationships within the private sector. Technical assistance and financial advice on ways to take community school models to scale, adapt continuous quality improvement systems and engage the private sector most effectively would be of great assistance to those immersed in the worlds of education, social service or local government.

But where to begin? One simple step that all community development organizations can do is to get to know the schools in the communities they are seeking to improve. Invite the schools to the conversation, acknowledging that their success in educating youth has a significant impact on community-wide long-term success. Like all people working for positive change, educators are acutely aware that they need the support of their communities to accomplish their mission. And, indeed, many of the barriers to learning lie outside education's role, such as illness, hunger, and poverty. These are the responsibility of the community – local governments, neighbors, businesses and community development entities. It's time for us to open conversations and doors to each other.

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