



# A Look at Community Schools

Saba Bireda October 2009



Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

Children living in poverty face many obstacles outside the classroom that can hinder their success in the classroom. Unaddressed health care needs interfere with learning and cause low attendance. Inadequate and inconsistent housing may deprive students of a safe and quiet place to study. A lack of affordable and accessible child care forces many young adults to sacrifice learning opportunities to care for younger family members. And poverty's economic stress may cause students to be less engaged and parents to be less involved in their children's education.

The advent of accountability-based school reform has pushed many high-poverty schools to focus on providing effective instruction and meeting high academic standards. Numerous schools have made progress in these areas but few have been adequately equipped with the tools needed to confront external learning obstacles related to poverty.

A small but growing number of “community schools” have bridged the gap between the provision of antipoverty services and an excellent academic program. They capitalize on the school's physical space and access to students and families in order to deliver much-needed services in a central, accessible location. Community schools partner with nonprofits and local agencies to provide students with health care, academic enrichment, mental and behavioral health services, and other youth development activities without burdening school staff.

Community school partnerships can complement proven school improvement strategies—effective teachers, challenging curriculum, and expanded learning time. These partnerships also allow teachers, principals, and staff to concentrate on what's happening in the classroom with the knowledge that students' “outside” needs are being addressed.

And community schools involve adults through adult education classes and onsite social services. By extending school hours and enlarging the school's role in the surrounding community, community schools can become a hub for community-building activity while continually providing students with a strong academic program.

Recent evaluations of community schools throughout the country demonstrate that schools that integrate student services and a high-quality educational experience have a positive effect on students and their families in a variety of areas including student achiev-

ment, school attendance, and parent involvement.<sup>1</sup> Yet community schools differ greatly in the type of services they provide and how much those services are integrated with academic instruction. Additional research can determine which aspects of community school models most effectively improve student achievement.

The success of current community school initiatives, the urgent needs of students living in poverty, and the potential of community schools to increase student achievement point toward stronger federal support for the community school strategy. We need not look far for examples of national community school policy—England has committed to transform all of its 23,000 schools into extended schools (the term for community schools in England) by 2010.

This report will provide an overview of community school strategies in the United States and how community schools can decrease poverty's detrimental effect on students. There are many examples of community school initiatives—from national models to local school district initiatives. This report highlights the examples where research shows community schools have had the most success. It will also review England's extended school model and suggest how the United States can expand community schools based on England's experience.

Although community schools in the United States are limited in number, lessons can be gleaned from some successful initiatives throughout the country.

- Each community school needs a strong academic program at its center, no matter how comprehensive the nonacademic services are. Afterschool and all other extracurricular programming should complement the school's central academic mission.
- Principals, teachers, and other staff must be trained and willing to collaborate with outside organizations in order to maximize learning.
- Partnering nonprofits or agencies should dedicate an onsite employee of their organization as a full-time resource coordinator to operate as a contact point between the school and organization, students, parents, and other community members.
- Parents, school staff, community members, and other stakeholders play an integral role in determining the services that are most in need at a community school. Parent and community involvement in planning a community school can ensure that services that are utilized improve student outcomes.
- Consistent, quality evaluations can help community schools determine the strengths and weaknesses of their services and programs and prevent schools from becoming stuck in nonproductive partnerships.



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