

San Mateo County's Redwood City Community Schools: Setting the Standard

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a time when there are significant complaints about the schools in this country and in the state of California, San Mateo County has shown that the neighborhood school can become the focal point of the community it serves and even strengthen it. For the majority of the country, the belief is that schools are to educate our children academically. But what we have come to realize over the past decade is that school influences a larger part of our children's lives and that the most powerful way to improve successful outcomes for the children in the areas most impacted by immigration and poverty is to increase the educational view of schools. In order to do this in a time when resources are diminished and creativity is necessary, collaboration is a must. It has also been recognized that government agencies do not always have the answers to assist in the determination of services for the consumers or in the delivery of those services. It has become evident that communities often know what they need in order to improve their situations. The Community Schools of Redwood City are proof that collaboration and community involvement improve the lives of the people in the surrounding neighborhood.

This case study focuses on the Community Schools in Redwood City. These schools each have true collaborations at work in them in order to make them run. They have involvement not only from funding sources but from the parents and the students. In order for the school to become the gather-

ing place for a neighborhood, the families have to have a voice in what happens in that school. To be most effective, community schools should have the following: a shared vision, shared leadership, high educational expectations, enrichment activities, and family services. Redwood City's sites exemplify these qualities. The other crucial element that the Redwood City schools have is that they were born from the desire of one of the educators working in one of the elementary schools and grew out of that success.

My case study examined the four Redwood City Community School sites to determine how they ran, who they served, and what were the benefits of their existence. The Redwood City Community Schools are present in the four schools that serve a population that is typically disenfranchised. The populations they serve are the children who are at greatest risk for academic failure. These sites are located in neighborhoods that are dominated by poverty, immigration, and a primary language other than English. Each of the sites has a Family Resource Center (FRC) on the school grounds. The FRC at each site serves as a physical location where parents and students can receive a core set of services and a variety of other services based on what the community that surrounds them requires. These sites have seen improvement in the overall lives of the children and the families that they serve.

Since Contra Costa County is already collaborating in the communities with the greatest service

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needs, it is only natural to at least give the community school idea some further exploration. It is a project that should to be undertaken slowly and lead by some entity other than Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) or Children and Family Services (CFS). While EHSD or CFS can present the approach to the community, some other leader needs to come forward, so that it is a community driven project and not a bureaucratic endeavor. The time is ripe for this undertaking given the current view of the country's schools and their future if something does not change.

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Introduction

In 1989, The Children's Aid Society of New York City collaborated with the community of Washington Heights in a way previously unheard of with the schools and the community. This collaboration was developed in response to a study from two years earlier that revealed that the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights was struggling with poverty, overcrowding, a large first-generation immigrant population, a high risk of drop-outs, and a lack of social services in the community. From this dismal assessment, the community school concept was born.

The community school is one where the school becomes the focal point of the neighborhood that surrounds it. It is the "hub" that provides support and services to the families of the community. Thus, according to the Children's Aid Society (CAS), it unites the three most important influences in the lives of children—school, family and community. The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities states that "a community school promotes student success by focusing on the broad community context in which education and learning happens."

Like other counties, Contra Costa is faced with decreasing resources and increasing community needs. It has also struggled with figuring out how to meet the needs of its changing populous. The county has experimented with various methods of community engagement, a common theme being one of collaboration. Contra Costa County is involved in numerous collaborations in recognition of the need to improve services to the families that it serves. For one, Contra Costa County has Service Integration Teams (SIT) that are composed of co-located so-

cial service staff from the Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD). Another is the Children's Interview Center, which is a collaboration between the District Attorney, Law Enforcement, Child Welfare, and Community Violence Solutions (formerly Rape Crisis).

And finally, Children and Family Services has collaborated with Children's Mental Health to address the needs of the children both agencies serve through system of care approaches that include wrap-around and interagency planning councils. But even with all of these top-notch collaborative efforts, one might argue that the communities they strive to serve are still not fully engaged. For example, five years ago, through its Family to Family initiative, Contra Costa County held a series of Town Hall Meetings. The hope being that the communities would be able to share concerns and needs with the agency. However, like San Mateo County's community schools have demonstrated, could the county delve deeper and more meaningfully into the community?

This case study will examine how the Redwood City Community Schools have penetrated the community at a deeper level than many other collaborative approaches and how it has used that engagement to develop a hub of prevention and early intervention social services for the community.

Overview

REDWOOD CITY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

A Community School is an approach, not an educational program, according to CAS of New York and the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University. Part of every community school is the most identifiable feature of the approach—the Family Resource

Center (FRC). The FRC is typically located on the school grounds, with the school providing the physical plant. FRC's house many social services like mental health and benefits eligibility. FRC's also serve as a hub for other services at the community school. One of the nice things about onsite FRC's is that they represent a place that the families can identify as a source of support. In the Redwood City FRCs, there are bilingual staff to greet everyone who enters; the sites are open year-round. Referrals to services beyond those offered on site are provided. FRC's do not make the community school. They are just the most visual and tangible representation of the community school's presence.

In 1995, through a grant from Healthy Start, the first community school in Redwood City was born at Taft Elementary. The principal recognized the need for a new approach to neighborhood services and sought to enhance the availability of onsite prevention and early intervention services. San Mateo's Human Services Agency (HSA) was a willing partner as they had already out stationed staff into this school in recognition of the community need for local, easily accessible services.

Since that first fledging start 11 years ago, San Mateo has extended the community school concept to 12 sites, and they are exploring the expansion to an additional site within the next 12 months. The four Redwood City schools that serve Elementary, Junior High and High School youth and families demonstrate the best collaboration of all of the sites. They have brought together the City of Redwood City, the School District, the county, and nonprofit agencies like Redwood City 2020 as some of the 17 partners working collaboratively in this endeavor.

Key Elements of the Model

Family Resource Centers offer the following services to students and families:

- Counseling,
- Case management,
- County benefits enrollment,
- Health insurance enrollment/retention,
- Adult education (ELS/computers),

- Parenting education,
- School readiness home visiting, and
- Basic needs assistance.

In addition to these core services, the community school offers the following additional services:

- Youth involvement and leadership which includes activities like student council;
- Core academic instruction and academic supports;
- Community involvement, which includes neighborhood associations and businesses;
- Parent/Family involvement and leadership, which includes school site council; and
- Extended day enrichment activities.

The Community School Model for the Redwood City School District is best conceptualized in a diagram. (*See Appendix A.*)

Evaluation and Outcomes

The John W. Gardner Center at Stanford has provided the Redwood City Community School partnership, and shared leadership teams with trainings as well as data collection and research to assess the impact of the community school on the children and families they serve. The John W. Gardner Center has determined that community schools generally incorporate shared leadership, quality instruction, enrichment activities, and comprehensive family services. It is still challenging to measure the outcomes and to demonstrate large improvements in the test scores of the children served through the FRC's and who attend the community schools, because the population served tends to be the students at greatest risk of academic failure. There are still improvements seen. For example, when compared with similar students without these services, there is a significant increase in the English CST scores. Test scores are an important and easily measurable way to determine the outcome of the services offered through the FRC at the community school. There are other advantages to the FRC's that are not as measurable. The John W. Gardner Center has a youth data archive that is assessing longitudinal achievements in addition to academic successes. Four areas where positive outcomes are expected are:

Learning and Achievement

- Academic gains
- Improved student attendance
- Reduced suspensions

Family Outcomes

- Improved family functioning
- Increase parent involvement
- Better access to services

Behavioral Outcomes

- General improvement in behavior
- Decrease in high risk behavior

Community Outcomes

- Lower rates of violence and safer streets

During the 2004/2005 school year, the four school sites in Redwood City provided mental health services to 284 children and their families. These sites are located in areas that are impacted by poverty and a large first generation immigrant population. The population is 85% Spanish speaking, with a majority undocumented. Despite these obstacles, Redwood City's FRC's annual evaluations for the past six years have demonstrated measurable improvements in family functioning, children's academic success, and the well being of the children and the families served.

Success and Obstacles

At a recent forum where these four schools gathered to share their experiences, successes and challenges, it was evident that this approach was successful in each of the schools but in different ways. The community served by a community school must come together and develop and tailor programs with their available resources that meet the needs of their children, their families and their community at large. As was demonstrated in this forum, there is no one prescribed way to create a community school. While there are over arching concepts that should be incorporated, in order to succeed, each must take on the flavor of the community for which it will become the focal point

Implications for Contra Costa County

Always on the lookout for new ways to better serve our communities, Contra Costa County is a county that believes in collaboration. Child welfare in Contra Costa is already experimenting with placing staff into the schools. It has already made inroads into community-based services through the SIT sites. The geographical areas that could serve as Community School sites have already been identified through the Family to Family and Redesign evaluations.

Additionally, there are many similarities between the two counties. Contra Costa is similar to San Mateo in both population and land mass. Both counties have divided up their service delivery into three geographical areas. Both counties have distinct areas where there is a large population of first generation immigrant and Spanish primary language households.

The identified communities of the Iron Triangle in Richmond, the Monument Corridor in Concord, and the Old Antioch area are all prime areas for considering the Community School approach. These are the areas that most closely resemble the communities that caused the birth of the community school concept all those years ago. Also with the inroads that have already been made, it seems that the county is primed to get involved in such an endeavor. The neighborhoods that surround the schools in suggested target areas are desperately in need of better access to social services and other programs to improve their lives and the academic success of their children.

However, a key to success with the community schools is in the leadership. When I looked at all of the FRC's and community schools in San Mateo, the sites which were most successful were the ones where an entity in the community has taken the lead operational responsibilities. Redwood City's first Community School came from the desire of the principal at Taft Elementary School. Once the principal was convinced this service approach would improve the community, it served the partnership was developed

and services have grown from a Family Resource Center to a Community Schools approach. Once it was recognized county-wide as an effective means for community service coordination, San Mateo HSA partnered with additional school sites to increase Community School locations and services. Thus, if Contra Costa County or any other county considers implementing this approach, they should study and consider Redwood City as their conceptual model.

Recommendations for Contra Costa County

If Contra Costa decides to go forward with this approach it should start with only one location and then assess that location's sustainability before expanding to other schools. I recognize that this suggestion seems obvious, but when other schools learn of the community school approach and the positive impact that it has on the students, their families and the community as a whole, there will be many more clamoring for a community school with a FRC in their neighborhood. The following should be considered:

A presentation should be made to the local schools in the county, with particular interest in the schools in the identified target areas. Once this presentation has occurred, a more formal discussion should occur with those schools that express interest and the elementary schools of the target areas. Contra Costa could consider just approaching a smaller group by only presenting to one geographical area of the county for the first presentation and then presenting it to another geographical area if there was not any interest generated from the first presentation. However the first community school site is selected in Contra Costa, must be found someone in the school district to champion this idea and to take it forward. Then it will need to be determined how and what presentation will be given.

When the location is being assessed, one of the considerations that must be made is whether or not there is an available physical facility to house an FRC at that site. If there is not one available, this issue will have to be addressed. An FRC is the unifying point in the community school.

A small step that could be undertaken without much planning would be for Contra Costa County to assess whether or not it is cost-effective to put an eligibility worker into the target areas. An eligibility worker could be out-stationed into a target area and then the costs and benefits could be assessed.

Another area that would need more planning would be for Contra Costa EHSD to meet with Contra Costa County Mental Health to determine if Mental Health is going to partner in the community school effort. In San Mateo they did not have Mental Health as one of the original partners which resulted in HSA creating a position, called a Psychiatric Social Worker (PSW). This meant that HSA then had to supervise licensed clinicians in order to increase the availability of mental health services at the FRCs. Having Mental Health as one of the original partners in Contra Costa would avoid this job classification issue all together.

Once a location and community champions are identified, there needs to be an open forum where the idea is presented to community based organizations (CBOs), law enforcement, parents, enrichment programs, and foundations in an attempt to gauge commitment and available resources. This forum should include service providers that are already servicing these populations like the Welcome Baby program and the First 5 Commission. They should be approached to determine if home visitors should be located at the FRC. Welfare to Work program and groups like the Private Industry Council could be brought into the discussion to consider their employment services for a place at the FRC.

One of the final issues that must be addressed is to the challenge of collecting the data necessary to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the community school approach. The way that many areas have accomplished this is by partnering with an educational institution. For example, in San Mateo they are working with the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford. Contra Costa County already has a relationship with the University of California at Berkeley where they have already collected and analyzed data. Therefore they would be a likely candidate to aid in

the assessment of this endeavor as well. However, the school location that is chosen might also have an institution that they would want to have conduct the analysis. No matter what institution is selected, the methods used have already been explored by various other institutes of higher learning, thus making this undertaking not so overwhelming.

Conclusion

It will be a large undertaking to develop even one community school in Contra Costa County. The county must have partners and the commitment of the community before this undertaking can even be given further consideration. Without community buy in, the county could go into a community with a great concept that will be met with resistance. In order for a community school to be created with an onsite Family Resource Center, staffs need to get this concept to the schools in targeted areas and get them to lead this charge, knowing that they have county support. Community Schools with FRC could improve targeted communities and the children in those schools immensely. The county just needs to approach its creation with awareness that it does not always have all the answers. Taking a concept to the people in advance of implementation is an extremely effective way to guarantee success.

The time has come for this type of collaboration to occur. It is not an issue of whether or not there will be support for it, but will that support bring forth committed collaborative partners. I recommend that Contra Costa County at least present the idea to the school districts that we work with throughout the county to get a reading on their readiness. Community Schools could be the answer to many concerns.

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APPENDIX A

Redwood City School District/Redwood City 2020 Community School Model

