

Community Schools

The Issue

Too many students come to school with needs that impede their ability to thrive academically. If we really want to close the achievement gap, we must supplement their regular coursework by addressing factors that are beyond the control of teachers and schools yet have a direct effect on student outcomes. Important factors such as healthcare, social services and parental involvement are too often divorced from school life, although they are critical to student success. These supports are even more crucial at a time like the present, when a struggling economy puts even greater pressures on families.

The Solution

We propose transforming some of the schools serving our neediest students into community schools that bring together, under one roof, the services and activities that our children and their families need.

With the support of mayors and/or other government leaders, local agencies and community groups, community schools could provide students the services beyond instruction that they need to reach their potential. A variety of federal, state and local funding streams could be drawn upon for these services.

School buildings would be open all day and evening for tutoring, homework assistance and recreational activities. Medical, dental, recreational, counseling and child care services would be available to meet the community's needs.

Community schools would create an inviting environment for parents and other adults by offering parents customized supports such as English language instruction, employment counseling, citizenship programs and GED

programs. Having these programs and social services in schools could encourage parents to get more involved in their children's education, and help to stabilize families so they can better support their children's learning.

Community schools are not a new concept. They have their roots in the earliest, richest traditions of public education. Today, successful models of community schools can be found in Baltimore; Boston; St. Paul, Minn.; Portland, Ore.; Chicago; New York City; and throughout the country. One example is the John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School in St. Paul, Minn., one of three "Achievement Plus" schools developed through a partnership between the St. Paul Public Schools and a local philanthropy, the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. Each Achievement Plus school is a community school that integrates resources from the public and private sectors to help the school, its families and its community. The John A. Johnson Elementary School is open to the community during afternoons and evenings, and community partners on site help families with their food, clothing and housing needs, and provide them assistance through a health clinic, mental health counseling, a dental clinic and a reading program providing one-on-one tutoring in reading to students in grades K-3. A full-service YMCA attached to the school provides physical education, a Head Start program, a daycare center, a teen center and a variety of after-school and weekend recreational activities.

The time has come to broaden the debate about accountability to include shared responsibility for the success of our children. Community schools offer a means to eliminate the achievement gap by educating the whole child and providing our neediest students with the supports they need to succeed.

AFT's Role

The AFT will advocate for a federal law that provides support for the development and implementation of community schools to serve our neediest children and provide them and their families with the supports necessary for success. We will work with state and local officials, agencies and community groups to coordinate resources to support the community school model, to improve student learning and to strengthen families and communities. We will encourage our local leaders to continue to be involved in creating these types of transformational schools and will support their efforts through our Innovation Fund.