

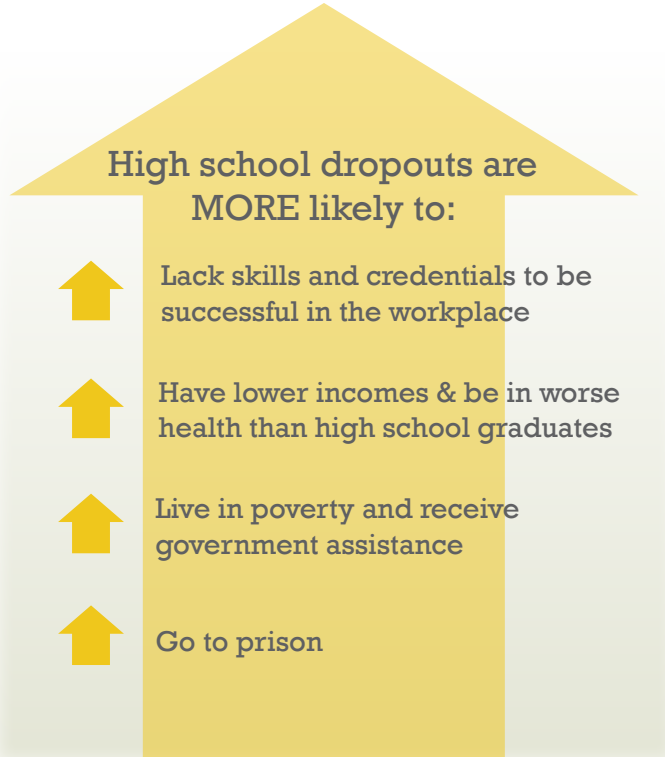
A School and Community Strategy for the 21st Century

• Martin J. Blank
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America's schools now enroll the most diverse group of young people in history, and their progress depends on the environment in which they live and learn. Many states are experiencing stagnant high school graduation rates and unacceptably low performance in math and science. Many students are disengaged, and young people are seen as problems rather than as individuals with assets, hopes and dreams. As a nation, we must act collectively to ensure that the youth of today succeed as workers, family members and citizens.

Obviously, to improve our educational system, we need effective teachers, and schools like all public institutions must be accountable.

But in order to be successful, young people and their families also need more connections, more support, more opportunities, more learning time and more engaging learning opportunities from the entire community. Schools need to develop and maintain robust relationships with families and other community institutions. At the heart of these efforts must be a commitment for schools and communities to work together to create strong and purposeful partnerships for change and results.



parents, educators, residents and community partners provide guidance and oversight. School personnel, the YMCA and an independent intermediary provide day-to-day management of the enterprise. The Community Learning Centers are showing improved academic performance, higher attendance rates and greater parent involvement and, moreover, are attracting new families in some neighborhoods.¹

Multnomah County, in partnership with the city of Portland and six school districts in the county, organized 58 Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) Community Schools. The initiative provides an array of extended learning, service learning, health and social services and parental engagement support to schools. A Community Coordinating Council led by the county executive and made up of representatives from the city, school districts, non-profit partners and families guides the initiative. Within a decade of their foundation, SUN Community Schools showed a 75 percent increase in reading scores, a 77 percent increase in math scores, an average daily attendance of 95 percent along with student behavior improvements such as increased class participation and homework turned in on time.²

Communities and Schools Move Forward

There are a growing number of communities that are moving this school and community agenda forward. Cincinnati's Board of Education established a policy that all schools built under a major school reconstruction program will be Community Learning Centers. Each school has a different physical and program design that reflects the needs and aspirations of neighborhood residents. The intensive community engagement process that led to these school plans distinguishes Cincinnati's initiative. Networks of community partners focused on extended learning, physical health, mental health, college access and parental engagement, and the partners provide these services at the schools. A full-time resource coordinator, employed by an external partner (i.e., YMCA) integrates the work of community partners in the school, while



Students put on a show after school at one of Multnomah County's SUN Community Schools.

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Photo courtesy Mary Lipp and the Harlem's Children Zone

Harlem Children's Zone has seen remarkable success both in their students and the greater community because they engage the community in their students' education.

education as well. In 2010, HCZ successes included: 100 percent of third-graders tested at or above grade level on the math exam; 100 percent of high school after-school program participants remained in school; 90 percent of high school seniors were accepted to college.³ The commitment from the White House to the HCZ vision through the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative is a recognition that our society must target its resources intensively to support our most valuable asset: today's youth.

Strategies that Work

More and more school districts and their communities are moving in this direction. They are positioning schools as centers of community. These are places that have transformed their curriculum and instruction, scheduling, school layout and especially their relationships and responsibilities among school staff, students, families and community partners. They rely on multiple inter-related strategies that combine broad-scale learning along with community involvement to achieve results: They set high expectations for all students, integrate real-world learning, focus on the whole child, and are conduits for engaging people and resources from within the community.

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Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) represents an intensive effort in Harlem to ensure the success of students and to rebuild the community. Its work reflects many of the principles and values of community schools, including the need for a high-quality academic program, enriched and extended learning opportunities, an array of health and social services as well as engaged families and an engaged community. HCZ also has an intensive focus on early childhood opportunities through its Baby College for young parents and its Harlem Gems preschool program. It extends its efforts to support students who enter post-secondary

Scaling up the Nation's Schools

Moving community schools and initiatives like the Harlem Children's Zone to scale requires significant shifts in how we view public schools along with federal and state policy. When introducing the new US Education Secretary Arne Duncan, President Obama agreed, "We need a new vision for a 21st-century education system—one where we aren't just supporting existing schools but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money but demanding more reform."⁴ This is what it will take to make this happen:



Photos courtesy Arts @ Large

Why Art is Essential in our Public Schools

by Ryan Hurley, Arts @ Large

The arts inspire. The arts challenge. The arts educate. The arts build relationships. The arts provide fresh and creative ways for teachers and young people to interact and learn together.

Studies have shown that involvement in the arts helps kids increase test scores and promotes academic achievement. Kids who are involved in the arts are:

- * **4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement.**
- * **3 times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools.**
- * **4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair.**
- * **3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance.¹**

With so much focus and pressure on standardized testing, little time is left for creative engagement, especially in underserved schools that are so often working impossibly hard to live up to these standards with very limited resources. Most kids are not getting enough art—in or out of school.

At Adams Elementary School in Hamilton, Ohio, Children experience the arts as part of each of their core subjects—math, science, language arts and social studies. They also participate in a class in each of four art disciplines—visual art, music, dance and drama—every week, taught by a certified arts instructor.

Kids at Adams have multiple opportunities to learn and experience a concept. They "don't just learn to tell time, for example, by hearing a description of an abstract concept and watching the teacher move the arrows on a cardboard display. They're taught a dance where they become a clock, with their movements changing to reflect the changing hours. They become time."²

Here, art becomes the vehicle for learning and it nurtures the learning process because each child learns differently—some read well, others write well, while others learn by listening and speaking. Programs such as the one at Adams not only offer art for art's sake but also support the learning process in general.

The arts are essential to a child's development and more art education opportunities for children are important. If you are a parent, enjoy the arts with your child together, encourage your child to participate in the arts inside and outside of school, tell your child's school that the arts are an important part of a quality education. Anyone can be an arts advocate by supporting funding for arts education and the local, state and federal levels.

This editor's box was developed with Arts @ Large; a non-profit organization that provides multi-disciplinary arts programming for public schools in Milwaukee. www.artsatlargeinc.org

Communitywide Planning and Decision-making:

Youth, parents, community and school leaders should become partners in the planning and oversight of school reform. If the people and places affected by change have a voice, implementation will be most effective.

A New Accountability Framework:

A single standardized test should not be the basis for judging schools or students. "Teaching to the test" doesn't benefit the child's overall education and preparedness for the world. Instead, schools should rely on an accountability model that includes multiple measures of academic achievement as well as measures of engagement, attendance, social, emotional and ethical competencies, physical well-being and family and community involvement.

Learning to Work Together:

Teachers, principals, other school personnel and people in social work, youth development, health and mental health and community development have different experience and academic backgrounds. Some have limited experience working directly with students, families and the average citizen. They need training and support to enable to work more effectively together and in partnership with families and communities.

Increased Funding

Ensuring that disadvantaged students in under-resourced communities have access to an excellent and equitable education has been a cornerstone of the US public school system for more than 40 years. Even as schools work to use resources more efficiently, additional funding is essential for school functions such as early



The graduating class of 2011 are seated for their commencement ceremony.

John Dewey said that "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." This rings true when we reflect upon the potential of a fully functioning educational system that is grounded in the community, serves the whole student and draws the best from each one.

care and education; out-of-school enrichment opportunities; mentoring; preventive health, mental health and family services; family and community engagement; and service, civic, and environmental learning opportunities.

Education Is Life

John Dewey said that "education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."¹⁵ This verity rings true when we reflect upon the potential of a fully functioning educational system that is grounded in community, serves the whole student and draws the best from each

one. The strength of our evolving democracy requires our ongoing and renewed commitment to this cause. Those that have blazed the trail of reform and innovation live and breathe to see students succeed. They have developed a recipe for success that is dynamic and needs only to expand through a unified vision, creativity and partnership. Only by intentionally and relentlessly working together across organizational boundaries will our nation get the results we need for the 21st century and beyond.

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Martin J. Blank is the president of the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) in Washington, DC. He leads IEL in its efforts to build the capacity of people, organizations and systems—in education and related fields—to cross boundaries and work together to attain better results for children and youth. Blank has been associated with IEL since 1985, focusing his work on building bridges between schools and other institutions with assets that can support student success. Blank also serves as the director of the Coalition for Community Schools (www.communityschools.org), which is staffed by the Institute for Educational Leadership. The Coalition is an alliance that brings together leaders and organizations in education, family support, youth development early childhood, community development, government and philanthropy.

For more information on the Coalition for Community Schools, at the Institute for Educational Leadership visit www.communityschools.org or www.iel.org.

