

Implementing Community-Oriented School Structures

Center on Innovation & Improvement

A community-oriented school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the public school and other community resources, and it is often open for extended hours and days. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and family and community engagement leads to improved student achievement and attendance, stronger and more involved families, and healthier communities (Bireda, 2009; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003).

Each community-oriented school looks different, because each works to meet the unique needs of its students in their particular context. The concept is based on nearly a century of research that has concluded that children develop along multiple, interconnected domains, and when one developmental domain is ignored, other domains may suffer (Blank & Berg, 2006). By addressing the needs of the whole child—physical, social, emotional, and academic—community-oriented schools create environments that fulfill all the necessary conditions for learning. We also know that when the core academic curriculum is tied to the community, removing the artificial separation between the classroom and the real world, student outcomes are improved (Blank, Berg, & Melaville, 2006). “Complementary learning” involves coordinating non-school community and family resources with existing school services; co-locating these services at the school can have a positive, synergistic effect on a number of desirable outcomes for students, families, schools, and communities (Grossman & Vang, 2009).

Evaluating one model of community-oriented schools, Communities In Schools’ seven-state study shows improvement in math, reading, and graduation rates is linked to integrated service provision. Notably, the CIS Model of providing integrated student services has a stronger impact on school-level outcomes than providing services for students in an uncoordinated fashion (see <http://www.cisnet.org/about/NationalEvaluation/Normal.asp>). Research also suggests the successful engagement of urban parents and community residents on school campuses requires diverse outreach strategies, including using personal outreach methods in a familiar language and creating an inviting environment, but the strongest motivator is showing how all services/programs ultimately help the children succeed (O’Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008). Research on community-oriented schools in rural settings is sparse, although there is indication that interventions are needed in such settings (U.S. GAO, 2004).

Action Principles

For District

1. Ensure each community-oriented school has a strong academic program at its core, with all other services complementing the central academic mission.
2. Ask each partnering organization to designate an employee at each school site to operate as a contact point between the school, organization, students, families, and community members, with the goal of creating sustainable and effective partnerships.
3. Develop joint financing of facilities and programs by school districts, the local government, and community agencies.

For School

1. Ensure that all staff—administrators, teachers, and other staff—are willing to collaborate with outside organizations and are provided with training to do so effectively.
2. Involve parents, community members, school staff, and other stakeholders in planning for services to be offered at the school site.
3. Integrate in-school and out-of-school time learning with aligned standards.
4. Incorporate the community into the curriculum as a resource for learning, including service learning,

place-based education, and other strategies.

5. Conduct quality evaluations regularly, including data collected from all stakeholders, to determine strengths and weaknesses of services and programs offered to create a continuous cycle of improvement.

References and Resources

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