

The Boston Globe
March 3, 2002

Social Services Find A Home in Schools

By Laura Pappano

The complaint has been made so often and for so many years, it's become a cliché: schools are being asked to do too much.

Teachers feel like social workers. Guidance counselors are overwhelmed. Administrators try to deal with students who don't do homework, who act out, and who have hours of unsupervised time after school to fight, hurt themselves, or plan ways to disrupt schools.

Why can't schools just teach? Why must the job always be bigger?

Yet, it is. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam is a powerful incentive for students and schools to get down to business, but it does nothing to address the greater challenge of education reform: helping students actually learn.

"You want test scores raised, but kids are coming to school with abuse histories, not properly clothed or fed, and with medical issues," said Bob Kilkenny, executive director of the Alliance for Inclusion and Prevention, a nonprofit mental health agency based at the Washington Irving Middle School in Roslindale. "Schools have never been able to deal with these social issues effectively. They need partners who are going to come in and have expertise."

It is precisely that worry - that education reform without social support is doomed to be just another fad - that has some schools seeking to be all things to all people.

"Community schools" or "full-service community schools" are partnering with private nonprofit agencies to provide whatever services people need, from GED and job training classes to family therapy, homework help, and after-school programs.

The theory? Helping families with problems will help students do better in school.

"It makes common sense," said Martin Blank, staff director of the Coalition for Community Schools in Washington, D.C., which estimates there are 4,000-5,000 community schools "and growing" nationwide.

"When you offer parents the opportunities to deal with some of the problems and crises in their lives, they are more likely to get engaged in the schools."

Utopian? This community school business is chaotic and - yes - eerily idealistic. There are potential problems, including controlling the quality of services offered by independent agencies who come to the school. In Boston, busing can make it a burden for families to

spend evening time at a school across town. Some school buildings, too, are space-starved and not suited to housing, say, a therapy suite.

But Matt LiPuma, responsible for developing school-based programs for The Home for Little Wanderers, a nonprofit child welfare agency, said schools offer them the best shot at actually helping their clients. The agency now provides counseling and support services in more than 40 Boston schools, and through a program called Boston Excels, partners with five others.

"When we're all in one place, it's much easier to consult with a teacher, to talk about behavior plans," said LiPuma.

In the past, he said, schools might refer a family, but the family might never call. And sometimes when families did seek help, LiPuma said the agency didn't communicate well with the school.

The effort to create community schools began a decade ago; many schools are still trying to turn a hodgepodge of services into a cohesive program.

In Boston, several schools are embracing the idea, including the Irving, one of three US middle schools to win an Eisenhower Foundation grant to transform into a community school. For seven years, the Alliance for Inclusion and Prevention has been based at the school, providing special education services for children who would otherwise be sent to private or residential schools.

With five social workers on site, Kilkenny said, they can help other students, too. Thelma Godding of Dorchester, for example, is grateful that her seventh-grade daughter can attend weekly therapy sessions at the school instead of traveling several miles to a clinic.

In recent years, the agency has expanded its role to offer after-school tutoring as well as bring in other nonprofit agencies to run programs from soccer to "Latin Rhythm and Drumming," to running a club that has senior citizens teach students how to knit.

"It's great for me as a principal," said Richard Maloney, who said having the mental health agency in Washington Irving gives him resources for any of his 850 students. "When a parent comes in and says, 'I need extra help for my child.' I can say, 'I have something right here,'" said Maloney.

Now the people at Washington Irving are trying to make the facility even more user-friendly. Last week, Kilkenny gathered parent volunteers in the new Family Welcome Center and asked, "What else could the school offer?"

Parent Iris Mathis of Dorchester, whose five children attended Washington Irving in the 1980s and 1990s and whose grandson, Marquise, is now in the sixth grade, had suggestions: A place to sit when you're waiting to talk to a teacher or principal, and computer and GED classes for parents at night. And another parent to talk with, especially after you've had a rough conference about your child.

"You come out and you are so frustrated to hear this stuff about your child," said Mathis. "If you just had somebody to talk to, to vent to."

So just how much can community schools - or any school for that matter - really do? "A full-service community school has everything a family needs to help that child succeed in school," said Martha de Acosta, director of education and training for the Eisenhower Foundation, who was at Washington Irving last week. "Everything is in the school."

Community schools come across as a complicated idea - too complicated to actually work. But when it does jell, it seems deceptively simple.

At the Robert L. Ford School in Lynn, principal Claire Crane has spent more than a decade outfitting her school with the programs and services parents need and want. She keeps the school open Monday and Tuesday 7 a.m.-9 p.m. (Thursdays and Fridays are paydays and people won't show, she's learned). On those evenings, there is free child care while about 150 parents attend classes in English as a second language, citizenship, and GED preparation. The school has also have offered classes on such topics as how to do taxes and how to buy a house, as well as job training and health screenings. Crane said courses reflect parental needs. Sixteen parents are taking Salem State College classes at the K-8 school building.

"A lot of school systems tend to educate kids in isolation," she said. "We do the whole family."

Lisa Connolly got an education along with her kids. When she moved to the neighborhood 12 years ago, she was a single mother working as a waitress who "had a very dim vision for my future."

But as the school reached out, she touched back. Connolly is now working toward her bachelor's degree in Urban Planning at Salem State, taking some courses at her fifth-grader's school, which she says sets an important educational example for her children. "It is very easy for me to say to my kids, `I have homework, you have homework. This is how you move up in the world,' " she said.

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