Schools to the Rescue

Educators are finding ways to make the lives of poor students and their families better every day. By Samantha Cleaver

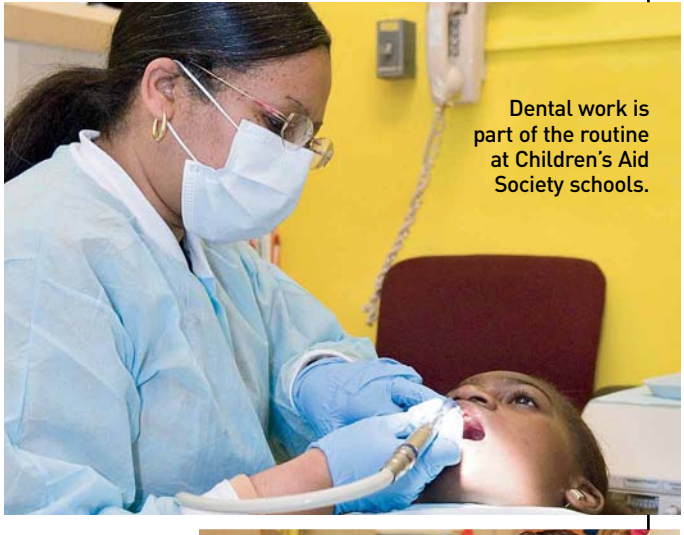
A student receives a check-up at a Children's Aid Society school.

When Theresa Kiger arrived at Roy Clark Elementary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as the assistant principal in 2001, she met teachers who were paying students' electric bills. In December, the hallways were jammed with teacher-bought gifts, from hand-me-down bikes to new mattresses. "Teachers understood that basic needs had to be met," says Kiger, "but there was no way to take care of those needs... and teach math and reading." In 2002, Kiger took over as principal and began to re-envision how the school could serve families. She partnered with the University of Oklahoma and converted a lounge into a health clinic. A full-time behavioral health therapist was hired to address students' emotional needs. Now, a community service coordinator connects families with resources like energy assistance.

Schools connecting families with community services isn't a new idea. John Dewey and Jane Addams had that vision a century ago. Recently, as models from the Children's Aid Society in New York City to SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) in Multnomah County, Oregon, redefine that connection, more services are coming into the school building. "Society has become complicated," says Sydney Rogers, executive director of Alignment Nashville, which unites community services with public schools, "and kids have a lot of issues. Teachers have to take care of kids who need a lot, in addition to being their teacher."

A community school's doors are open nights, weekends, and summers for meals, classes, and enrichment programs. Students who have a headache or toothache may be referred to an on-site health clinic. Once a week, families may pick up prepared meals. Parents come to school to attend adult education classes. The ultimate goal, though, is to impact student achievement. "As a partner," says Jane Quinn, director of the Children's Aid Society's National Center for Community Schools, "we come in with a set of services that are designed to remove barriers to learning."

Since 1999, community schools have expanded to 49 states and Washington, D.C. Districts from Evansville, Indiana, to Oakland, California, are focusing reforms around the community school



Dental work is part of the routine at Children's Aid Society schools.

Reading at the Family School, Northfield, Minnesota

PHOTOS: (TOP AND MIDDLE) COURTESY CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY; (BOTTOM) COURTESY HANNAH PUCZKO

MORE POOR KIDS

Just over 15 million children in the United States—21 percent—live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level: $22,050 a year for a family of four. Here are more startling statistics we can't ignore.

Child Poverty Has Increased

20.7% of children in the U.S. fall below the official poverty line.

1.4 million children fell into poverty last year.

Poverty Affects All Races

35.7% of African-American children live in poverty.

33.1% of Hispanic children live in poverty.

17.7% of white children live in poverty.

14% of Asian children live in poverty.

PLUS: THE POVERTY LEVEL IS SKEWED

Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice the official poverty level to cover basic expenses. Using this standard:

42% of children live in low-income families.

21% of children live in families that are officially considered poor (15.3 million children).

9% of children live in extremely poor families (6.8 million).

As part of the efforts of the Children's Aid Society in Harlem, New York, some schools offer community green markets such as the one pictured above.

PHOTO: COURTESY CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY

model. President Obama included grants for community schools in his 2010 budget, and organizations like the Coalition for Community Schools are advocating for community school principles in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization. "There is a greater sense of need," says Ira Harkavy, director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, "and greater demand for these types of supports." The demand is driven by results. At Roy Clark Elementary, test scores have increased more than 200 points since the community school initiative started.

Schools Meeting Basic Needs

When Flora Grayson, a fifth-grade teacher at Ingles Elementary School in Kansas City, Missouri, noticed that one of her students had been absent for three days in a row, she called home. Grayson learned that the student's family had been forced to stay with a relative when their electricity was shut off because of unpaid bills. Grayson connected the student's family with United Services Agency, which helped restore the family's electricity. By the end of the week, the student was back in school. Often, says Grayson, families don't know where to start if there's a problem, and the first responder is a teacher.

For many schools, the most pressing concern is helping families meet basic needs. Between 2007 and 2009, according to the Brookings Institution, the number of people who live in poverty increased by 4.9 million. Brookings reported that between 1999 and 2009, two thirds of the increase in poverty occurred in the suburbs. "People have left cities," says Brent Schondelmeyer, director of communications with KC LINC (Kansas City Local Investment Commission), and "have gone to surrounding areas that don't have well-established social services infrastructure."

In response, schools are connecting with outside resources. In Oregon, SUN schools host fairs to connect families with organizations that provide rent or energy assistance. Bailey Elementary school in Providence, Rhode Island, uses a wrap-around model that brings staff together to solve problems. If a student's family needs help finding housing or paying bills, the school wellness team steps in, including a case manager who follows up long after the school day ends. Having basic-needs services that start at the school, says Joseph Picchione, Bailey's principal, is "like having another school start at the end of the day."

Schools as Health Centers

Health needs are usually easy to identify—kids with vision problems squint at the board, students with hearing loss shake their heads in confusion, and students with asthma are absent for days at a time. But other health needs can be overlooked. In 2007, a 12-year-old student at the Foundation School in Largo, Maryland, died when bacteria from an infected tooth spread to his brain. This year, a mobile dental clinic visits schools near Largo to prevent problems.

During the 2007–08 school year, there were 1,909 school-based health centers across the country, and, according to the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care (NASBHC), the number is increasing. These health centers provide dental and mental health screenings, prescriptions, and asthma treatments, among other services.

On-site health services provide more than the occasional ice pack or Band-Aid. In the Bronx, New York, health centers reduce hospitalization rates and increase attendance for students with asthma. A report by Public/Private Ventures found that school health centers increased student use of services, especially preventative care, which reduced emergency care.

One emerging need is addressing mental health concerns. Currently, 75 percent of school clinics provide mental health services. "Having a partner in the school who is an expert in mental health can help children calm down and stay focused," says Quinn of the Children's Aid Society. It's also a boost to academics. According to a 2007 study, students who used mental health services increased their grade point averages compared to students who didn't use the service.

Schools as Food Pantries

At Lee's Summit Elementary, a KC LINC school in Missouri, the percentage of students who receive free and reduced-cost lunch has increased from 40.7 to 54 percent since 2006. In response, Harvesters, a Community Food Network program, packs bags of food (BackSnacks) for kids to take home on weekends. Each BackSnack includes milk, fruits and vegetables, cereal, and dinner entrees. Through BackSnacks, 13,000 students receive nutritious food each week.

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that 22.5 percent of U.S. children live in food-insecure households. The number of people who live with "very low food security" doubled from 2000 to 2008. In response, some schools are opening up for meals. During the summer, Earl Boyles Elementary in Portland, Oregon, serves hot lunches to area families. This year, SUN is working to expand the summer meal program so families can eat on holidays and conference days, too.

Reducing Absenteeism

Obviously, students who consistently miss school lose learning in the process. It's estimated that 10 percent of kindergarten and first-grade students are chronically absent, missing 10 percent or more days of school. Many times, services that meet a family's unique needs can keep kids in school.

At a rural Missouri school, one family wasn't able to send their kids to school regularly because they didn't have clean clothes. In response, KC LINC bought a washer and dryer for the school. Now, the kids pick up clean clothes when they arrive. Washers and dryers "are small things that nobody's going to campaign for," says Schondelmeyer, "but if you're the teacher it makes a difference."

Schools as Education Centers

Engaging parents who are dealing with concerns at home or learning English is challenging, so schools are making use of resources to educate parents. Twice a week at Greenvale Park Elementary School in Northfield, Minnesota, parents join their children for breakfast. When the bell rings, the kids go to class and parents attend an ESL class. Eventually, says Hannah Puczko, community education director of the Northfield Public Schools, the hope is that parents will become classroom volunteers.

SUN also hosts a parenting class that discusses child development, healthy

relationships, and child-rearing techniques. After a 2009–10 class, 67 percent of the participants scored higher on a nurturing scale, and 64 percent of parents were more confident in their ability to help their child learn.

Schools as Enrichment Centers

Linda Lanier, CEO of the Jacksonville Children's Commission, insists that low-income children need access to the same experiences as middle-class peers if they are to succeed. That's why 42 of the Children's Commission's 62 after-school programs are targeted at kids who are in danger of retention, says Lanier. Through community partnerships, 10,000 kids a day experience chess club, sports, leadership activities, and more.

In general, students who attend after-school programs have better school-day attendance than kids who aren't involved, which usually translates to academic benefits. At Bailey Elementary, students attend after-school programs that start with reading or math intervention and end with enrichment, from karate to gardening. Every student who attended the programs dramatically improved their reading scores. The key, says Principal Picchione, is making after school a seamless extension of the school day. A smooth transition between school and enrichment means greater achievement for students.

Connecting With Community: The Results

When students are getting their basic needs met, they're ready to learn. No surprise, then, that a study by the Children's Aid Society found that, in New York City, teachers reported that having community service professionals in their building "enabled them to teach." In many ways, bringing community services into schools is a way of reconnecting teachers and students. "Teachers can't be social workers and good teachers," says Peggy Samolinski, SUN Community Schools program administrator, but connecting families with services "is creating opportunities where children can leave their worries at the classroom door." □

PHOTO: JEFF FUSCO

THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Whether or not you work in a "community school," you can play a vital role when it comes to connecting students with resources. Here's how to maximize your role.

Find Out Who's in Charge If your school has a community services coordinator, or community services office, learn about the existing resources and partnerships.

Collect Resources If there is a resource guide for your district, keep it handy for quick referrals.

Act Early Teachers are the first source of referrals for students, says Peggy Samolinski, SUN Community Schools program administrator. You're the attendance taker who notices who's not sleeping well, who's hungry, who can't see the chalkboard.

Start the Conversation Community school partnerships often start with a conversation between a teacher, a principal, and a community organization, says Ira Harkavy, director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, and teachers need to be on board for any service partnership to work.

Know Your Neighborhood Get to know the families you're working with by doing porch visits in the weeks before school starts. Visit the family with the sole goal of building a relationship, before there's an academic or behavioral problem.

Assess Your Needs The first step, according to the Harvard Family Research Project, is to figure out what your school needs. It will be more effective to connect your school with resources once you know what your community lacks.

Connect With Your School's Programs Teachers can work to make the transitions between class, after school, and even the next grade level as seamless as possible simply by communicating with after-school personnel, working with an after-school program, or meeting with teachers who will work with their students next year.