

Leveling the Playing Field

Community Schools Confront Poverty to Improve Student Success

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In A Nut Shell

Despite enormous investment in education reform, the achievement gap between poor children and their higher-income peers persists, threatening the economic security of our nation's most vulnerable youth. In this paper, we examine the ways in which poverty and education are inextricably linked and explore one approach to K-12 education that is creating new opportunities for low-income youth. Community schools confront poverty and education together by working in partnership with the community to bring critical resources into the school in an integrated educational experience. From after-school to health clinics to parent education programs, community schools provide low-income youth a level playing field and empower them to take the first steps toward a brighter future.

Acknowledgements

The key to success is simple - surround yourself with brilliant, experienced people who are generous with their time, suggestions and thoughtful criticism. These hands gave support to this work:

Martin Blank, Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership

Amy Gerstein, John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities at Stanford University

Deanna Niebuhr, Partnership for Children & Youth

Lorne Needle, United Way of the Bay Area

Lisa Villarreal, The San Francisco Foundation

The project would not have been possible without a team effort. Thank you to *Sara Mahmood*, *Amanda Miller*, *Esther Kim*, *Praise Santos*, and a special thanks to *Susan Jeong* for hustling us along.

Thanks to our leaders - *Anne Wilson* and *Eric McDonnell* from United Way and *Jennifer Peck* from the Partnership for Children & Youth for your relentless work for equity in education.

More than anything, we are continuously inspired by the kids who show up every day ready to learn, and by the community school leaders like *Stefanie Eldred* at Hillcrest, who help them overcome barriers and succeed.

The education work of United Way of the Bay Area receives significant support from many individuals and organizations including: *Target*, *AT&T* and *United Way Women's Leadership Council*.



I. Redefining the Problem With Public Education

Angél Lopez is a single father with two daughters attending Napa, California’s McPherson Elementary School. When he was injured on the job two years ago, his family was plunged into extremely tenuous financial circumstances. With the family’s basic needs in jeopardy, and Angél’s eldest daughter already struggling academically, how would they focus on their education and thrive in school?

Fortunately for the Lopez family, McPherson Elementary is a community school that operates a Family Resource Center on campus. The Family Resource Center’s staff helped Angél access food stamps, assisted him in applying for Section 8 housing, and provided health and parenting classes. Angél also participated in the Center’s volunteer program that gets parents into classrooms so they can better understand their children’s school day.

Today, Angél credits McPherson Elementary with helping him and his children flourish.

“With the classes and volunteering, I have knowledge of what my daughter is doing in school—I’m not limited. It’s so different than when I was growing up because my parents didn’t speak the language and so couldn’t help me with my homework. [This program] is about the future of my children.”



Education and Economics Go Hand in Hand

The principle that educational achievement is the primary door to economic success in life is at the foundation of our public education system. However, an alarming achievement gap exists between children growing up in poverty and their higher-income peers, effectively barring low-income children from an adulthood that includes economic mobility and financial security.¹ Moreover, even after decades of efforts to reinvent the public education system, this gap not only still exists but is growing: a comparison of test scores among low-income and higher-income children over the last 50 years reveals that the disparity between these two groups has grown by 40 percent,² leaving the poorest members of our society trapped.

1. Jacob, B., & Ludwig, J. (2013). Improving educational outcomes for poor children: Working paper 14550. National Bureau of Education Research.

2. Reardon, S. F. (2013, April 27). No rich child left behind. The New York Times. Retrieved June 20, 2013, from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/no-rich-child-left-behind/>.

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The impact of this and other similarly sobering statistics is profound and lifelong. As these children grow up, the achievement gap turns into an opportunity gap, creating a starkly stratified society. With postsecondary education becoming more important than ever to securing employment in the 21st century,³ the vast majority of today's low-income children will become tomorrow's low-income adults, perpetuating our country's seemingly unbreakable cycle of poverty.



Calls for school reform to address this achievement gap abound from almost every sector of society, each armed with its own solution to the education problem: better funding, more accountability for teachers, or a longer school day. Decades of vigorous efforts on these fronts have not yet succeeded in opening the floodgates for low-income youth to succeed in education. Is our public education system and its lifelong societal impact simply unfixable?

A New Vision for Public Education

A growing body of stakeholders seeks to answer that question with a resounding no and instead looks to a different understanding of education and its relationship to poverty. Professor Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University's Graduate School of Education recently asked, "So how can we move from a society in which educational success is not so strongly linked to family background?" His answer offers this new perspective on the future of education: "Fundamentally, [we should be] rethinking our still-persistent notion that educational problems should be solved by schools alone."⁴

Joining this call, Richard Rothstein of The Economic Policy Institute posits that we must do more than address what happens during the school day alone. He offers this vision of the future of education:

[W]e could ensure good pediatric, optometric, and dental care for all students in school-based clinics...We could provide higher-quality early childhood care so that children are not parked before televisions while their parents are at work...We could fund after-school programs so that inner-city children spend less time in dangerous environments and, instead, develop their cultural, artistic, organizational, and athletic potential.⁵

3. Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018. Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce.

4. Reardon, S.F. (2013, April 27). No rich child left behind. The New York Times.

5. Rothstein, R. (2013). Why children from lower socioeconomic classes, on average, have lower academic achievement than middle class children. In Carter, P. L., & Welner, K. G. (Eds), Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance (pp. 61-74). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

From Vision to Reality: Community Schools

The vision that these and many other leading thinkers in the fields of education and economics describe can actually be found today—in community schools. The term “community school” is used to describe an approach to K-12 education that brings the fragmented supports and services found in the community into schools, creating cohesive partnerships that promote the overall well-being of children and their families in service of improving student learning.

For more information about the community school strategy and specific community school models, visit the **Coalition for Community Schools** website at www.communityschools.org.

Community schools are not a new phenomenon, and over the last decade in particular this approach to public education has increasingly gained traction in low-income communities, especially as more and more data revealing their powerful impact emerges. Today, community schools can be found across the country, and while there is no specific formula, they are all founded on the understanding that poverty creates barriers to learning that schools cannot ignore if all students are to have the same chance at success. *Therefore, all community schools work toward the same goal: to join the power of school and community resources into a unified educational experience that eliminates these barriers, creating the greatest opportunity for every child to succeed.*

To accomplish this goal, community schools develop partnerships that bring key services into the school: after-school and/or summer enrichment programs; physical and/or mental health care; food programs; tutoring and mentoring; parent education and engagement programs; and much more. They also build relationships with businesses, higher education institutions and other entities that can help make student learning more engaged and connected to the world in which students live. These partnerships are more than just a collection of services; community schools integrate these resources into the very structure and function of the school, using joint leadership and ongoing collaboration to create a comprehensive educational experience for both students and their families.

In order to truly transform the educational experience, the community school strategy must be paired with teaching and learning of the highest quality—a reconceptualization of the key ingredients of academic achievement to include what happens both inside and outside the four walls of the classroom. In this way, community schools have the power to expand opportunities for low-income children to succeed in education and in doing so, start to crack the cycle of poverty wide open.

Disentangling Poverty and Education to Create a Better Future

Too often, our country’s pervasive problems with education and poverty are tackled as two separate issues—investigated by experts in different fields, addressed by different policies and programs—and this approach has resulted in little progress on either front. Educational success is critical to economic success,⁶ and yet children growing up with minimal resources

6. Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018. Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce.

face enormous obstacles to academic achievement, setting them up to follow in their parents' footsteps and raise the next generation of children living in poverty.

This paper examines the myriad of ways that education and poverty are intertwined and explores how, by understanding poverty and education as deeply entangled problems, community schools offer a new opportunity to break poverty's truly vicious cycle.

II. The Link Between Poverty and Academic Achievement

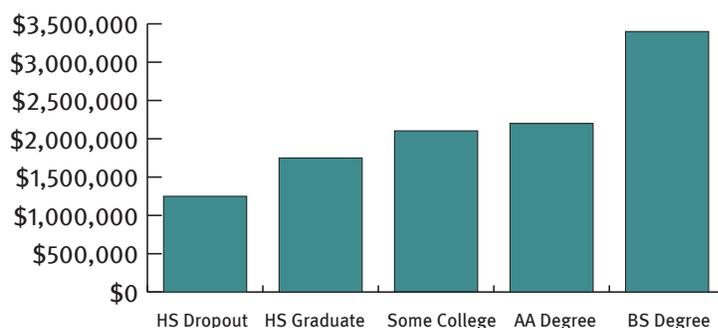
In the 21st century, high school graduation is widely seen as a non-negotiable milestone, with college attendance a necessary next step for those who strive for economic stability and growth. Indeed, high school graduation and higher education can mean the difference between a life spent struggling from one paycheck to the next and one filled with opportunities for economic mobility and financial security. Research demonstrates that for those who fail to reach those milestones, opportunities to find steady employment, earn a sustainable income, and move up the economic ladder are often few and far between.⁷

Education's Far-Reaching Impact

College-educated adults are:

- More likely to receive health and pension benefits from their employers
- Less likely to be obese and less likely to smoke
- Less likely to have children that are obese
- More likely to engage in educational activities with their children, resulting in their children being better prepared for school

Lifetime Income by Education Level



Source: Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018. Georgetown University. Center on Education and the Workforce.

The Achievement Gap

Children living in poverty face numerous obstacles when it comes to educational success, and the resulting achievement gap between low-income youth and their higher-income peers is well-documented. Modest gaps between children from low-income and higher-income families are present even when these children first enter school, and the gap widens as the children grow.⁸

This inequity in academic achievement can be traced all the way to high school graduation: students in families whose incomes are in the lowest quintile of income distribution nationwide are six times more likely to drop out of high school than students from the top quintile.⁹ A 2012 study summarizes this dismal reality in stark terms: *“Overall, children who spend a year or more in poverty account for 38 percent of all children,*

*but they account for seven-tenths (70 percent) of all children who do not graduate from high school. Poverty matters.”*¹⁰

7. Ibid.
8. Magnuson, K., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2009). Enduring influences of childhood poverty. In Cancian, M. & Danziger, S. (Eds.), Changing poverty (pp. 32-37). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
9. McKeon, D. (2006). Research talking points on dropout statistics. Retrieved June 20, 2013, from <http://www.nea.org/home/13579.htm>.
10. Hernandez, D. J. (2012). Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

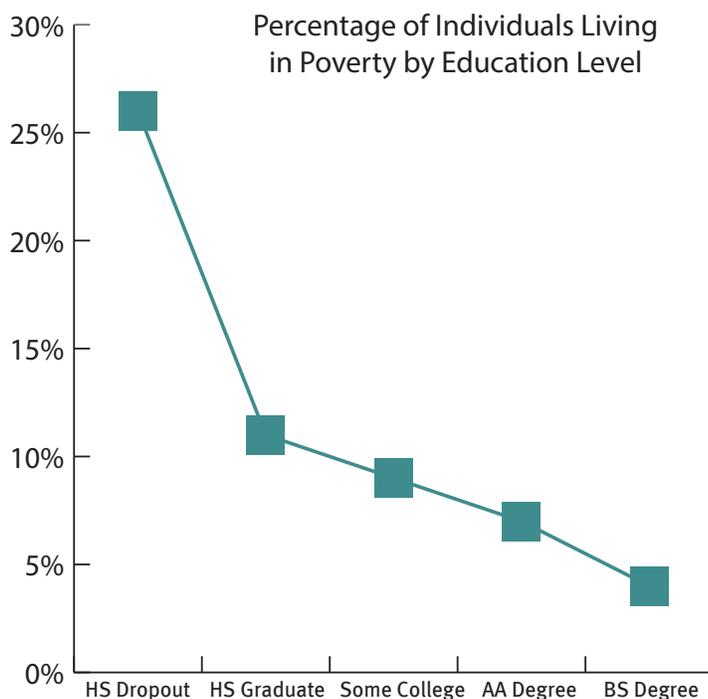
Where Does the Achievement Gap Come From?

Low-income youth typically end up in schools with lower-quality teaching and fewer resources, from outdated text books to a lack of educational technology to dwindling opportunities for music, art and physical education. These disadvantages alone are enough for many to explain our country’s pervasive and expanding achievement gap between low-income children and their higher-income peers. However, a growing body of evidence also points to the profound impact that disadvantages outside of the four walls of the classroom have on academic achievement.

An examination of just three key out-of-school factors that impact student success—early childhood preparation, physical health, and after-school/summer programs—reveal the alarming impact that a life spent in poverty has on success in education. For example, children’s early exposure to foundational academic skills is critically important to their future ability to thrive in school. Children living in poverty often miss out on that early preparation, putting them at a disadvantage from the first day of school.¹¹

Additionally, children living in poverty are more likely to lack health insurance, and uninsured children are seven times more likely to fail to receive medical care.¹² Lack of preventative care or treatment for conditions such as asthma or diabetes often leads to frequent absence from school, and chronic absenteeism - even early on in a child’s academic life - is one of the most powerful indicators of eventual failure to graduate high school and/or attend college.¹³

Enrichment in the hours after school and during the summer is also vitally important to academic success. After-school programs have been shown to improve students’ grades, test scores, engagement in learning, social and emotional development, and much more.¹⁴ Furthermore, low-income youth lack access to the summer experiences that their higher-income peers regularly enjoy. This single factor has been shown to contribute to as much as two-thirds of the achievement gap by the 9th grade.¹⁵ While for many students activities like tutoring, music lessons, and team sports are just a part of daily life, children living in poverty lack the financial resources to access these educational opportunities.



Source: Baum, S., Ma, J., & Payea, K. (2010). Education pays 2010: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society. New York: College Board Advocacy and Policy Center

11. Reed, D. (2005). Educational resources and outcomes in California, by race and ethnicity. *California Counts: Population Trends and Profiles* 6(3), 1-23.
 12. Blank, M. J., Melville, A., & Shah, B. P. (2003). *Making the difference: Research and practice in community schools*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools.
 13. Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *Chronic absenteeism: Summarizing what we know from nationally available data*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.
 14. National Institute on Out-of-School Time at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College (2009). *Making the case: A 2009 fact sheet on children and youth in out-of-school time*.
 15. Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2007). Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2007: 11–32. doi: 10.1002/yd.210.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation offers a poignant summary of these obstacles faced by children living in poverty:

Children whose families live in poverty often lack resources for decent housing, food, clothing, and books, and they often do not have access to high-quality child care and early education or to health care...Many arrive at kindergarten without the language or social skills they need for learning. They miss school frequently because of health or family concerns. They slip behind in the summer with little access to stimulating educational programs or even regular meals. Consequently, the children in poor families are in double jeopardy: They are more likely to have low reading test scores and, at any reading-skill level, they are less likely to graduate from high school.¹⁶

III. Community Schools: Creating Opportunities to Break the Cycle of Poverty

The Ingredients of Community Schools' Recipe for Student Success



How exactly does the community school model work to improve outcomes for low-income youth? The opportunities and supports provided in community schools have been shown to have a wide array of positive effects on student success. By bringing these services together and integrating them into the core educational strategy, the community school model harnesses an exponential power to improve student success.

The list below outlines just a few of the specific services that many community schools bring into the school setting and illustrates how each service impacts student achievement.



Health Services

Students' physical health is strongly linked to their academic success, and programs that address student health issues have been widely shown to positively impact academic achievement.¹⁷ Because low-income youth suffer from a wide range of health problems at higher rates, experts across fields agree that schools should play a role in improving student health as a strategy for addressing our nation's achievement gap.^{18,19}



Mental Health Services

Access to mental health services produces improvements in standardized test scores in reading and math; increases in student grade point averages; increases in attendance; decreases in disciplinary actions; and higher graduation rates.²⁰

16. Hernandez, D. J. (2012). Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
17. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The case for coordinated school health. Retrieved June 20, 2013 from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/cshp/case.htm>.
18. Basch, C. E. (2010, March). Healthier students are better learners: A missing link in school reforms to close the achievement gap. *Equity Matters, Research Review*, 6.
19. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The case for coordinated school health. Retrieved June 20, 2013 from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/cshp/case.htm>.
20. Center for School Mental Health, University of Maryland, Baltimore. The impact of school mental health: Educational, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.



Family Engagement

When parents are engaged in students' educational experience, students achieve higher test scores and earn higher grades, improve English language development, attend school more regularly, and are more likely to go on to postsecondary education. When parents talk to their children about school, set expectations for academic achievement, and ensure that their children participate in constructive out-of-school-activities, student learning improves.^{21,22}



After-school Programs

Students who participate in after-school programs - which can range in activities from academic tutoring to organized sports to music lessons - experience a wide array of benefits: improved academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, reduced course failures, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates.²³

These are just a few of the ingredients of community schools' recipe for improving student achievement. While each service on its own has the power to improve student achievement, in community schools they are brought together and integrated into a single, reframed educational experience that has the power to clear the path to success for children in poverty.

Improving Performance Along Key Indicators of Long-Term Academic Success

As community schools around the country mature, they have begun assessing their long-term impact on students and positive indications are emerging. For example, 13 years after the launch of Cincinnati's Community Learning Centers, citywide high school graduation rates have skyrocketed from 51 percent to 80 percent. Furthermore, the achievement gap between white and African American students has shrunk from 14.5 percent to 4 percent.²⁴



While these initial findings are encouraging, research assessing the community schools model has not yet tracked students longitudinally through high school graduation or college attendance. However, a substantive body of current research has measured community school students' improvements along some of the most significant indicators of long-term academic success. Equipped with these data, we can see how community schools increase opportunities for low-income students to break out of a life of poverty.

21. Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement, annual synthesis 2002. Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

22. Westrich, L., & Strobel, K. (2013). A study of family engagement in Redwood City community schools. Stanford, CA: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities.

23. George, R., Cusick, G. R., Wasserman, M., & Gladden, R. M. (2007, January). Afterschool Programs and Academic Impact: A study of Chicago's After School Matters. Issue Brief #112. Chapin Hall Center for Children.²⁵ Coalition for Community Schools & Institute for Educational Leadership (2013). Community school results. Retrieved June 27, 2013, from <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Community%20School%20Results%202013.pdf>.

24. Coalition for Community Schools & Institute for Educational Leadership (2013). Community school results. Retrieved June 27, 2013, from <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Community%20School%20Results%202013.pdf>.

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The following table describes four educational benchmarks that research has identified as key indicators of long-term academic success and offers examples of how community schools impact those indicators, greatly improving students' chances to reach critical educational milestones.

Indicator	Why It Matters	Impact of Community Schools
Third-grade Reading Proficiency	In third grade, children learn to read; in fourth grade, they begin reading to learn. Children who are not proficient in reading at this turning point have increased difficulty in absorbing written materials across subjects, making connections between ideas, and using higher-level thinking, leading to substantially lower high school graduation rates than their fellow students.	As a whole, community schools across the country are improving students' grades and test scores. In Indianapolis, Indiana, 73 percent of community school third-graders passed the state reading test, up from only 29 percent just three years earlier.
Chronic Absenteeism	Students who are not in school cannot learn. Chronically absent students can miss up to an entire academic year in middle school alone. Chronic absence has an escalating impact over time, dramatically reducing the chances that students will earn a high school diploma.	Community schools reduce absenteeism among students across grade levels. In Ohio, the School Age Child Care model reduced absenteeism among 8th graders from an average of 18 days to 5 days—a 70% decrease.
Disciplinary Problems	Students who are disciplined with suspensions or expulsions are excluded from the classroom, sometimes for long periods of time, increasing the risk of academic failure. Moreover, students who are disciplined drop out of school at a rate five times higher than those who without disciplinary issues.	Students in community schools undergo fewer disciplinary actions. The SUN Community Schools in the Portland, Oregon area have improved student behavior by 70 percent.
Parent Engagement	Engaged parents equip their children early on with knowledge and social skills that help them thrive upon entering school, expose them to enriching art and music experiences, and are poised to act should any obstacles to academic progress arise. Among elementary and middle school students, those with parents who are meaningfully involved in their educational experience perform at higher levels, leaving students whose parents lack the time or ability to be engaged at a substantial disadvantage.	Community schools increase parents' involvement in their children's education. Chicago's Full Service School Initiative (FSSI) set out specifically to improve schools' climate for parent involvement, enhance the relationship between parents and school staff, and engage parents in both planning services and monitoring their impact. At the three FSSI schools, students' reading scores significantly improved, exceeding the citywide average by up to 19 percent.

The examples provided above are only a tiny sampling of the rapidly growing body of evidence showing students' improvement along key indicators at community schools around the country. As such, while the educational pathway of most community school students has not yet been traced all the way through high school graduation and college attendance, the impact that has been evidenced is that community schools increase the opportunity for students to reach essential milestones and start a new chapter, both for themselves and for the next generation.



IV. Life at a Community School

An examination of community schools' theoretical framework, basic structure, and key partnerships provides an important overview of this educational strategy and its impact. However, to truly understand the power of community schools, it is equally important to examine them at the ground level, exploring how they operate on a daily basis and what life is like for administrators, teachers, students, and families.

A Close-Up Look at One Community School

Hillcrest Elementary School is located in southeast San Francisco, in between the working class Excelsior and Portola Districts. Among the school's 480 students, 90% are enrolled in the federal free and reduced price lunch program, 65% are English language learners, and 16% are designated as special needs students.

Hillcrest's journey began in 2006 with funding from California's Healthy Start program, and over the past seven years, it has been transformed into a thriving community school. Today, Hillcrest has 35 partners that include a family resource center, a food bank, and city social support agencies. A majority of students participate in its robust after-school program, physical and mental health services are provided onsite, and parents are highly involved.

Speaking the Same Language

Integration and alignment are at the core of Hillcrest's approach to education. As Hillcrest Community School Coordinator Stefanie Eldred describes, it is essential that "everyone is on the same page." Hillcrest accomplishes this formidable task with a combination of inclusive leadership structures and a thoroughly embraced culture of collaboration. For example, at Hillcrest's monthly Partner Collaborative meeting, community partners meet with school administrators to set priorities, tackle challenges, and assess the impact of the school's strategies. In her role as Community Schools Coordinator, Ms. Eldred works on a daily basis to further align programming from external service providers with that of the school, as well as to cultivate and facilitate new partnerships; assess both student and family needs; and evaluate the impact of services provided.

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Hillcrest's after-school program offers further evidence of its commitment to integration and alignment at every level. Students have a seamless learning experience from the start of the official school day through the end of its four hour after-school program that offers sports and exercise, homework help, and enrichment activities. Classroom teachers and after-school staff participate in joint professional development activities, and after-school staff members meet with grade-level teachers on a monthly basis so they can mirror the themes being taught in the classroom. The result? As Ms. Eldred observes, "Everyone speaks the same language."



An Expanded Role for Classroom Teachers

At Hillcrest, substantial time and resources are devoted to equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to help children living in poverty to successfully learn. When Hillcrest's students undergo crises, ranging from a parent being deported to not having any food to eat that morning, teachers are able to respond and prevent learning from being derailed. When students need help that is beyond a teacher's capacity, assistance is fully available from the school's numerous partners. As one teacher describes, "I feel that I can just turn and there's a resource at the school I can refer a family to."

At heart, Hillcrest's teaching strategy is quite simple, as Ms. Eldred articulates: "We really really know our kids and their families." Regardless of where and how students' problems are addressed, at Hillcrest the solution always begins with deeply caring relationships between students and adults.

Impact of the Community School Strategy at Hillcrest

From 2010 to 2012, Hillcrest saw an 11% increase in California Standardized Test (CST) scores across all grades, as well as an 8% rise in the Academic Performance Index. In the 2012-2013 school year, Hillcrest's students reached another significant milestone when their CST scores surpassed San Francisco Unified School District averages. In the school's most recent assessment, every one of the school's staff members reported that they check in with at least two students each week about personal matters, and almost half of them check in with eight or more students on a weekly basis. Parent engagement has also risen sharply. In 2005, there was only a 50% attendance rate at parent/teacher conferences; in 2013, that rate rose to 90%.²⁵

25. Coalition for Community Schools, retrieved July 5, 2013 from http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/awards_2013.aspx.

With the passionate dedication of everyone involved in Hillcrest Elementary School, along with the ongoing refinement of the school's strategies and programs, opportunities for Hillcrest students to move toward a life beyond poverty can only continue to grow.

V. Creating a Better Future by Confronting Education and Poverty Together

It is clear that community schools have a profound impact on children and families living in poverty—but what is the source of that impact? Is it the enrichment provided by after-school programs, or perhaps health care services strengthening children's bodies and minds? While these and the many other opportunities and supports provided by community schools are potent resources, the real power of community schools does not come from tacking on an array of services to the school day. The real power comes from operating with an understanding of the tangled relationship between education and poverty and the resulting joint effort of schools and communities to create a diverse array of opportunities for students to succeed.

With achievement and opportunity gaps in our country growing every year, leading to ever wider gaps in quality of life, we can no longer afford to treat poverty and education as separate issues. Improvements in school financing and the quality of teaching and learning in low-income communities are extremely important and must continue. However, they can only have limited success when students' lives outside of school continue to be ignored. Similarly, support systems that address the challenges of poverty will only result in limited change if schools do not also provide effective teaching and learning. It is only when these efforts are combined that real transformations begin to emerge.

From big-picture policy to on-the-ground programs, low-income children will only get a fair chance at success if the intertwined nature of education and poverty is fully grasped and used as a launching point for change. By simultaneously and jointly confronting the challenges of education and poverty, community schools create opportunities for low-income youth to break free of the cycle of poverty and create a better life, both for themselves and for generations to come.

