

Blurring the Borders

When Schools and Communities Meet

by Joe Nathan

As walls between formal and informal learning are coming down, creative learning partnerships are springing up all over the country. The results are impressive: higher academic achievement, improved school attendance, and higher graduation rates.

All over the country, youth advocates, educators, parents, and community groups are joining together to use recent research about the value of small schools and shared facilities. In urban, suburban, and rural areas, great examples are developing. Sometimes it's to create schools in social service agencies, to modify existing schools, or to create learning opportunities beyond the bell.

These collaborations often lead to more active learning: programs combining classroom research and community service. The impact is very encouraging—improved student achievement, higher graduation rates, safer schools, and better faculty morale. Small schools and creative collaborations show how tax dollars can be stretched to produce even better results for young people and families.

Research Summary

Before turning to specific examples from a recent federally funded report, here is a quick review of research on small schools and shared facilities. A major federal research summary by Mary Anne Raywid showed that students attending small schools had higher achievement, better discipline and attendance, and higher graduation rates.

Students, families, and teachers reported more satisfaction in small schools. The report concluded that these findings have been “confirmed with a clarity and a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research.”

The argument that smaller schools may be better, but are more expensive, isn't necessarily true. A study in New York City found that if researchers looked at the question of cost *per*

pupil, larger schools were somewhat less expensive. But if they looked at the cost *per graduate*, small schools clearly were less expensive.

University of Chicago researcher Tony Bryk also has studied school size and cost. He concluded that “While school districts that are currently saddled with large physical plants might productively move toward schools-within-schools, there is little reason to continue to build more buildings like this. In light of the positive consequences for both adults and students associated with working in small schools, the reality is one of dis-economy of scale.”

As the following case studies show, a growing number of youth advocates and educators are using the small school research to improve services for children and youth. They are sharing facilities and staff—sometimes in agencies, sometimes in schools, to help meet student and family needs. Joy Dryfoos, who has studied shared facilities and calls them “community schools,” wrote that there is “a growing body of evidence that community schools are beginning to demonstrate positive effects on students, families and communities.” She says the impact of these programs “include and go beyond the expectations of traditional education reform.”

Encouraging Case Studies From Around the Nation

El Puente, a small public school located in a very low-income area of New York City, is a great place to start. El Puente was one of several small schools created by community activists and educators when the district wisely offered this opportunity to people throughout the city. El Puente serves a couple hundred high school students in a former church. The school shares facilities with social service staff who help students and families address a range of issues, including medical concerns, counseling, and teaching people to read.

With encouragement and assistance from the school’s faculty, El Puente’s students constantly combine classroom work with community service and activism. For example, they helped create a coalition of African-American, Hispanic, and Chasidic Jewish people to successfully block an incinerator that the city was going to put in their

The evidence is very powerful for blurring the boundaries between formal school and community programming.

already badly polluted neighborhood. Students are combining a study of advanced mathematics with development of a skateboard park that will be located underneath a nearby bridge. The school’s full name is El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. The faculty strongly believe in helping young people develop skills to work for a better world along with traditional academic skills.

The results are encouraging. More than 90% of the students who enter El Puente as 9th graders graduate four years later (in an area where large high schools have graduation rates



Photo courtesy of Center for School Change



Photo courtesy of Center for School Change

of about 50%). And although El Puente faculty strongly resist the idea that their school should be judged only on test scores, their students are doing very well on the challenging N.Y. State Regents Exams.

Another example of creative community/educator collaboration is a charter elementary school on the campus of the South Mesa Boys and Girls Club in Mesa, Arizona, in one of the lowest income neighborhoods and an area known for violent gangs. Staff of the Boys and Girls Club spend part of their time working with youngsters in the school, and the Club receives a portion of the state education funding for the school. State statistics for the Mesa Arts Academy show some of the greatest growth in achievement of any public school—charter or otherwise—in Arizona.

Another encouraging example comes from Cincinnati, at the city's Perham School. Seven years ago, Perham students had the worst record of any K–8 school in the city. Attendance, achievement, and discipline all needed major improvement. A new principal, Sharon Johnson, was assigned to the school. She immediately asked for assistance from FamiliesFORWARD, a well-respected local social service agency. Betti

Hinton, director of FamiliesFORWARD, agreed to place several of her staff at the school. They met with families, asking what programs they would like to have for themselves and their children. Based on these requests, FamiliesFORWARD staff set up classes to teach families such things as how to discipline their children, how to handle finances, and how to read. After-school classes for students included help with homework, dance, and African history.

Attendance, achievement, and discipline improved dramatically at Perham. The school has won district awards three years in a row for the significant progress that has taken place. Unquestionably curriculum and instruction changes helped. So did the close collaboration with FamiliesFORWARD. When U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley visited Perham a couple of years ago, he called it “an inspiring example from which we all can, and should, learn.”

Phoenix has another great shared facility example. Several years ago, educators approached South Mountain Community College to see if they would house a small charter high school focusing on agriculture and equine science. The college was delighted. The high school has several classrooms of its own, as well as sharing the excellent resources of the college—classrooms, library, extensive computer labs, lounges, and physical fitness facilities, along with college faculty. The high school classrooms are used by the college late in the afternoon and during the evening. Administrators in both the high school and college are very pleased with their collaborative arrangements.

Student academic achievement has been strong. Most students take some college courses

while in high school. Some have actually received their high school degree and an associate arts degree from the college in the same week.

In Minnesota, youth advocates at a St. Paul recreation center teamed up with educators to create the nation’s first charter school. City Academy is housed at a recreation center that served youth after school and on weekends. Students use classrooms and facilities during the day, and it’s open for others the rest of the time. President Bill Clinton visited City Academy in 2000 to praise its record of helping young people—and the model collaboration between youth workers and educators.

Another urban example shows what can be done with an existing large high school. Eight years ago Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas, was an extremely troubled place. Graduation rates, achievement scores, and attendance were all low. A new principal, Walter Thompson, was hired to help make improvements. After a year of listening, he worked with the faculty to create eight small schools in the building, which has 1,500 students. One of those small schools, Opportunity Center, serves only 9th graders who have failed. Teachers created seven more small schools based on themes such as Business or Creative Arts. Students from grades 9 to 12 choose among these small schools and take

most of their course work in them. Community groups have provided internships, apprenticeships, and other extended learning opportunities.

Again, the results are heartening. Wyandotte’s graduation rates and test scores are up dramatically over the last five years. And what about the faculty? There has been very little turnover. Faculty who were at Wyandotte during its troubled past report that the schools-within-a-school provide a far more satisfying, rewarding environment to work.

Creative partnerships also can be found in suburban areas. Almost ten years ago teachers, community activists, and parents in the Rosemount/Apple Valley/Eagan district (outside the Twin Cities in Minnesota) met to discuss the advantages of small schools. They planned seven small schools, all sharing facilities with a medical complex, businesses, and other institutions. The first has been open for five years. It’s called the Minnesota School for Environmental Studies, and is located on the campus of the Minnesota State Zoo (which donated the land for the building). The “Zoo School,” which enrolls several hundred 11th and 12th graders, was built for exactly the same per pupil cost as the 2,000-student high school buildings found elsewhere in the district. Zoo students make public presentations about what they are learning, and participate in internships in a number of placements including, but not limited

Field Notes

"There is not enough time in most public schools, as they are currently configured, to process and play with knowledge. Out-of-school time is what kids refer to as the real world—the world where you actually do something with the knowledge that you have.

POST, if structured with flexibility, can be the transition time for students to incorporate new knowledge or skills into playful (and purposeful) activity. The main problem is that many teachers and schools do not see that as valuable, so there is little communication between organized school and POST opportunities."

—Mark, Public High School Teacher



Photo courtesy of Center for School Change

to, the Minnesota Zoo. The U.S. Department of Education has named the “Zoo School” an “All-American High School” because of its creativity and outstanding performance.

Sixty miles away from the Zoo School is one of the nation’s most noted rural schools: Minnesota New Country School. This secondary charter school enrolls about 125 students, grades 7–12. It is run as a cooperative, with the faculty “owning” the school, setting their own salaries and working conditions. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given MNCS \$4 million to help replicate the school in other communities. Each school year starts with a family/student/advisor conference. The conferences help students develop a plan for how they will make progress toward graduation, which is based entirely on demonstration of skill and knowledge. There are no grades or bells at MNCS. Each student has a work station with a computer, and the opportunity to decorate that station with pictures of friends and family. Students work individually or in small

groups on projects that help them achieve the required mastery. Faculty move from student to student throughout the day, acting as facilitators, advisors, and coaches. Every six weeks the school has a presentation night where students share information they’ve learned. Each student is expected to present at least three times a year. The presentations often include the use of computer graphics and PowerPoint. Students have become so sophisticated that some of them have been hired by local businesses to create websites or manage databases. But learning at MNCS is not confined to what’s available by computer.

MNCS students are constantly doing research and performing service in the community. One project that attracted national attention involved students discovering frogs with less than four legs. This led to a presentation at the Minnesota legislature, which allocated hundreds of thousands of dollars to learn what produced the frog deformities. MNCS uses multiple measures to assess student progress. They regularly reflect improvements in achievement, as well as very strong attendance and a high graduation rate.

Finally, the recently created Northfield, Minnesota, Community Center is an example of innovative leadership. In this rural community, the city, school district, senior citizens center, and war on poverty agencies cooperated to produce a 50,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility that serves residents from birth to death. The facility includes a vast array of services for families, children, teenagers, and seniors, as well as a small public high school. The high school students interview seniors to supplement history research, and help with the Head Start Center, both of which are just a few steps from their classrooms. Charlie Kyte, former Northfield superintendent, now director of the Minnesota Association of School



Administrators, calls the community center “one of the most rewarding projects I’ve ever worked on.”

Final Words

Over the next few years, many communities will be rethinking the kind of buildings that house schools. Some places will erect new buildings. Others will rethink existing school buildings. Educators and community members will ask—how can we make the best possible use of tax dollars to meet the needs of our young people?

Research and experience show many benefits from creating small schools of choice within large buildings, and/or in collaboration with various organizations and agencies. The evidence is very powerful for blurring the boundaries between formal school and community programming. Doing things differently is never easy. But strong leadership, such as that described above, shows that small schools and shared or co-located facilities with community programs produce positive, lasting results. ☘

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A B O U T

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