

FOCUS ON: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

'It Takes a Village' to Educate Children in Indiana District

'Community schools' have surged nationwide

By May Ann Zehr
Evansville, Ind.

Being the principal of a "community school" means Kimberly A. Johnson doesn't have to go it alone in addressing some of the social or health problems that distract children from doing well in school.

Within just a couple of days last month, a nearby Wal-Mart store agreed to a request from one of Ms. Johnson's staff members to pay for shampoo to help a family get rid of head lice, a representative of a local women's shelter agreed to counsel students involved in texting or receiving nude photos, and a social worker for a public-health organization offered to find someone to chat with a parent about the side effects of medicine being considered to help her son stay focused in the classroom.

Ms. Johnson's K-8 Lincoln School relies on ties between its district—the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation—and churches, social service agencies, nonprofit community groups, and other local organizations that have built a web of support to nurture schoolchildren across the entire district from "diaper to diploma."

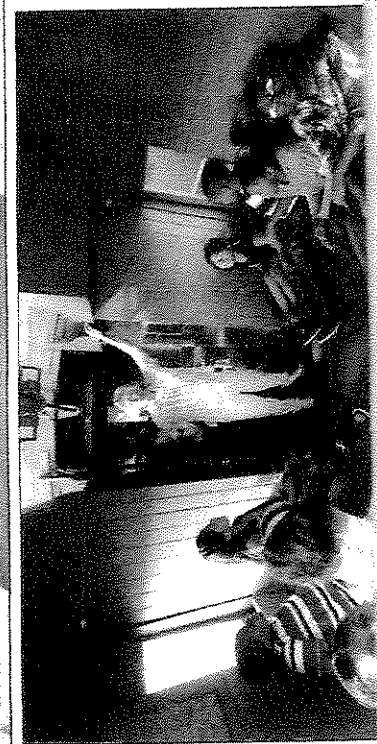
The concept of community schools



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Teashia Benson, 8, gets tutored after school at the Lincoln School by teacher Vicki Rouse.

Aaron Shakelford, 11, has his teeth cleaned in the St. Mary's Mobile Dental Health Clinic, which provides dental services to students regardless of insurance coverage through a partnership with the Evansville Vanderburgh school district.

Lincoln School students tour the train display this month at the Evansville Museum Transportation Center in Evansville, Ind. Lincoln operates under a "community school" model, meaning educators enlist social service agencies, nonprofit groups, churches, and other local organizations to provide students with needed services.



Photos by Bruce Crappen for Education Week

SCHOOLS OF THE WASHINGTON-BASED Institute for Educational Leadership, which has been promoting this approach to addressing the social, emotional, and academic needs of children, the number of communities with a systemic community school strategy has grown from eight in 2005 to 50 today.

Supporters of the approach include Arne Duncan, who oversaw the growth of such schools in Chicago when he was the schools' chief there and who praised it later on as U.S. secretary of education.

'Full Service' Grant

Some of the growth since 2008 has been fueled by the federal Full-Service Community Schools Program, one of the federal education programs that survived the recent budget cuts. The 23,000-student Evansville Vanderburgh system was one of 11 school districts that received grants from the \$10 million competition for that program in fiscal 2010. The Evansville grant is for \$2.5 million over five years.

"We're really desperately trying to diminish the isolation that so many vulnerable young people experience," said Marrin J. Blank, the director of the Coalition for Community Schools. "This strategy is a prototype for how you have collective impact."

The idea is akin to the vision behind the well-known Harlem Chil-

den's Zone in New York City. While the effort in Evansville to provide wrap-around services for schoolchildren isn't as well-known, the concept of community-school connections here may be a more feasible model for other communities to emulate because it hasn't involved a big infusion of private dollars.

Support Patchwork

The Evansville Vanderburgh school system, serving a manufacturing city of about 120,000 people on the Ohio River, has spent more than a decade fostering relationships with representatives of local organizations, which provide a range of in-kind support. The district also draws financial aid from 14 federal funding programs, and experts and educators say the district's experience might offer lessons for districts nationwide on how to provide more holistic services to children during a time of tight budget constraints.

A grant from the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment to the United Way of Southwestern Indiana underwrote the development of the first community school here in the middle to late 1990s, but private donations are now only a small portion of the financing for the school-community connection. Federal grants authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Educa-

tion Act that support that connection include regular Title I money, School Improvement Grants under Title I, money from the McKinney-Vento provisions for homeless students, and aid under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. Since 2000, the district has secured more than \$30 million in federal competitive grant funding to support the community-schools strategy.

Some community institutions have drawn on additional federal funds to support their involvement in the school district's drive to offer comprehensive support services. The private Welborn Baptist Foundation, for example, is using \$2.5 million in federal stimulus funds to run a prevention and wellness program in Vanderburgh County that includes a school-based component.

The school and community partners have also benefited from some unusual arrangements, such as a joint-purchasing agreement forged by Evansville Mayor Jonathan Weinzapfel and district Superintendent Vince M. Bertram, who was hired in 2007. Through the agreement, the city government and the school district have streamlined the purchase of such disparate but essential products as toilet paper, gasoline, rock salt, and copy paper, saving both parties hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

the district meet the needs of some of its most vulnerable families.

A traveling dental clinic provided by St. Mary's Health System in Evansville, for example, ensures that any child, regardless of insurance coverage or immigration status, can get regular teeth cleanings and have cavities filled and teeth capped. St. Mary's and the county health department provide free immunizations and physicals before the start of the school year. The Evansville Community Health Organization offers schoolchildren services through a health clinic, which charges fees based on a sliding scale that takes family income into account.

Mental-health services to low-income families are more spotty, though several mental-health organizations are partnering with the schools. One particularly vulnerable group is undocumented children, who don't qualify for insurance coverage with Hoosier Healthwise, the state's rendition of Medicaid.

Expanding the Network

The original partnership between one school, whose principal was Cathlin S. Gray, and the local United Way grew to embrace all 34 schools in the district and about 70 community partners, which support families with a range of services, including food-filled backpacks, camps for children with asthma, preschool, and a wide spectrum of

after-school programs.

More than a decade later, Mr. Gray is still the point person for family, school, and community partnerships for the school system, although now as the district's associate superintendent.

Meanwhile, a local bank, the Old National Bank, rents a building for \$1 a year to district administrators and leaders of community partners. It's now a one-stop shop for families seeking a wide range of services.

"We are strategically embedding this work in the systems of the district," said Ms. Gray.

Since 2008, the creation of community partnerships has been one of five pillars in the school district's strategic plan. "The schools cannot succeed alone ... when you look at the factors that affect achievement," Superintendent Bertram said in an interview. "The way I believe we improve our schools is getting to the individual students—addressing needs in an individual way."

Seventy-four percent of the students in the district are white, 22 percent are African-American or multi-racial, and the rest are Hispanic or Asian-American. Nearly 60 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Mr. Bertram credits the school-community connection with helping to raise student achievement. Four school years ago, only one of the district's schools was "exemplary," the top ranking of five in Indiana's accountability system. Last school year, 17 district schools were

deemed "exemplary."
However, the Evansville Vanderburgh district made adequate yearly progress as a district for the first time ever only last school year.

Relationships are built through monthly meetings between school staff members and representatives of community organizations. Other structures are in place on a broader level to create the glue for a school-community connection, such as the School Community Council, which consists of various teams with different purposes.

Ms. Johnson of the Lincoln School said she likely spends more time in meetings with community partners than a principal typically does, but "in the long run, you are taking care of issues before they escalate."

"You want to get to the root of the problem," she said.

It was in their most recent monthly meeting that Ms. Johnson, school staff members, a caseworker from Southwestern Healthcare Inc. and a social worker from the Evansville Community Health Organization discussed how to address the issues of the family being plagued with head lice, the "sexing" by middle school students, and a 6th grader whose behavior was hindering his academic success.

Using one predictor of a need for extra support, the principal drew from a list of children who are close to missing 15 days of school, and thus being deemed truant by state law. The principal briefly described the mental-health or social needs of some of the children who fall into that category. School student-support staff employees or the community representatives brainstormed what kind of assistance might help the children get on track academically.

month, Ms. Tolliver presented Nautica with a blank book in which she could write down ways "to let people know you can be a good leader." She prompted Nautica to write down two goals, which turned out to be "Don't have to say the last word" and "Talk when I'm told to talk."

Ms. Tolliver asked Nautica to write how she would know when she met the first goal. "When I get a good compliment," Nautica wrote. And as one measure that Nautica had met her second goal, the girl wrote, "When the teacher won't be having to repeat my name."

After more than two weeks of in-school suspension, during which she completed work assigned by her teachers, Nautica was permitted to start going back to class, be-

ginning with math class and adding another class every few days.

Working on a recent assignment at a conference table a few doors down from the principal's office, Nautica said she wanted to get back to class all day, every day, because "I'm not learning anything down here." If she doesn't get back to class, she said, "I don't get anything out of life."

Glenwood's Experience

At another school here in Evansville, the Glenwood Leadership Academy, community partnerships have supported the renovation of the school with an aim of making it the hub of the neighborhood. The school is poised to open

a gym with up-to-date equipment to nearby residents and plans to soon host staff members from local health-care providers to run a clinic on the campus. The nonprofit group Habitat for Humanity has built 19 affordable homes near the school.

Glenwood has been a persistently low-performing school and is in its first year of using federal school improvement funds to try to turn around poor student performance.

Tammy Dexter, new this school year as Glenwood's principal, said benchmark testing of the school's 365 K-8 students shows math and reading test scores are improving, but she expects that the school still won't make AYP until the

2012-13 school year.

When asked if community partnerships translate into improved academic achievement for students, Ms. Dexter said she recognizes they don't improve instruction, but she believes they have an effect on student performance.

"Can they affect student achievement? I absolutely believe they can," she said, "by providing opportunities and experiences to kids they wouldn't otherwise have that we can't cram into the [school] day."

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Nautica Wiley, a 6th grader at Lincoln, is currently the focus of such attention by school employees and community representatives, though she wasn't mentioned in that particular meeting.

Ms. Johnson removed Nautica from class recently because she was leading students in negative behavior that disrupted learning in the class. Ms. Johnson said Nautica's mother was concerned that the 12-year-old was being disrespectful and defiant to adults at home and at church, as well as at school. The adults in Nautica's life want her to use her leadership qualities and lively, engaging personality for good, according to Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Johnson and others revised Nautica's "individualized student plan," a tool used districtwide to identify a student's strengths and any behavioral problems that are hampering learning.

The staff set up a therapy session with the Lampton Center, which provides counseling for children and families. Ms. Johnson engaged Tjuana Tolliver, a principal of Nautica's former elementary school, to meet with Nautica once a week to help her set and meet behavioral goals.

Ms. Tolliver knows Nautica's family well, and she and Nautica like each other.

In a mentoring session last

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