

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Case studies of what works

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Albuquerque
New Mexico



ALBUQUERQUE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

In 2012, José Muñoz, the newly appointed executive director of the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County (N.M.) Community School Partnership (ABC), approached Ellen Bernstein, president of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation, with a request. Muñoz wanted ATF's help with drafting a resolution that would promote the community school model and bolster the area's struggling schools and students from imperiled communities.

Bernstein had long been a proponent of the community school model, having heard of it first under the leadership of the late AFT president, Albert Shanker, and later having the importance of the model reaffirmed by AFT President Randi Weingarten. She knew community schools had the remarkable power not only to help teachers and students, but also to stabilize entire communities by opening the doors of the schools to new partnerships and resources.

"Teachers know the reality," Bernstein said in a newsletter to her fellow members on community schools. "Schools are connected to the communities in which they operate. Students in high-poverty areas will continue to struggle if all of their needs are not met." (Read more at <http://atfunion.org/download/7119/>.)

If anyplace needed that sort of intervention, it was Albuquerque. With more than 100 of the 130 schools qualifying for Title I, and the majority of students coming from impoverished homes, it was no surprise that many schools weren't living up to their full potential. It was abundantly clear to everyone involved that it would take more than the normal turnaround strategies to bridge the massive opportunity gap between rich and poor. It would take a community effort.

Union-Management Partnership: Founding Community Schools

After forming a partnership with Muñoz and the ABC, Bernstein and the ATF set to work drafting a resolution that would put ATF support behind the Community Schools Act, a bill drafted by Muñoz and allies in Youth Development Inc. Partnerships, which are the heart of the community school model, were vital both for that initial bill and for all the work that has followed. While ATF managed to stir up interest on the ground among community

members and educators, ABC was able to pique the interest of school board members and potential partners to push the final bill through the Legislature. The combined voice of so many stakeholders eventually got the bill to the table, and then into law.

ABC and ATF's common vision for what children and families need to succeed has been key in building upon their successes. While superintendents come and go, with varying levels of interest in community schools and the barrier-breaking services they provide to students and families, the alliance between these two organizations helps ensure that the supports are available where they're most needed. That consistency is something local President Bernstein thinks can always be improved upon, and she would love to see a closer relationship with school administration to firmly cement supports for community schools in the future. "Right now, we have a one-sided agreement in the law. What I'd really like to see is a two-sided agreement where both parties have to agree to change things, and where there isn't a unilateral shift. I would really love to get this language into our collective bargaining agreement, into our contracts." Initial conversations and contract language communicating both the culture of community schools and current progress through partnerships could provide a better opportunity for consistent levels of interest, participation and input from school staff, administration and district leaders.

The Function of Community Schools: 180 Days, 180 Chances

"When you think about a school," says ABC Executive Director Muñoz, "You realize how important it is to a community. It's the first thing to go up after the houses, because where you're going to have families, you're going to need

schools. And every school has at least 180 days—180 chances—to reach out to those families and make a difference."

Muñoz has a passion for working with and serving young people, and after a long and successful career doing just that, he was hired in 2008 to help maintain and expand the community school programs that have become a vital part of education in Albuquerque and Bernalillo County. Since the early successes at places like Emerson Elementary, many other schools in the area have started taking the steps toward becoming community schools and opened the doors to new partnerships, expanded services and a greater potential for all their students. Muñoz is vital in making sure the partnerships are in place to provide support for growth and maintenance of those programs already functioning. In a community as entrenched in poverty as Albuquerque is, that can be a huge task, but it's one he takes very seriously.

"The power is in the partnerships," Muñoz says, "A hungry student is more worried about living than learning. A student without running water might not get to bathe, and gets bullied. There are a lot of people already out there providing services and resources, so when you bring them together and look at those root causes, you can start to fix them from the ground up. You create an environment for learning, and you help empower a whole community to move young people and their families forward."

The biggest barrier? Community schools handle complex problems, and more often than not that means complex solutions and long-term investments, which can be a hard sell to organizations with limited resources or that are used to instant, measurable gains. But Muñoz has done an amazing job at pulling in partners, and proving that the gains of the model are worth the time and investment. While Al-

buquerque's community schools have been lucky enough to have the continued support of the local government to help fund their programs, Muñoz also has been able to pull in organizations whose specialties have really made the difference for countless students. Organizations like Albuquerque Business Education Compact, AT&T, Fidelity Investments, Nusenda and the United Way of Central New Mexico have been huge financial backers. Groups like the Boys & Girls Clubs of America have offered after-school programs and supports to help students achieve, and the University of New Mexico has actually started the first Coordinator Institute to provide professional development for resource coordinators. And, of course, working with educators both on the frontlines and behind the scenes are the local unions: providing support, training and funding for important programs.

The Resource Coordinator: Implementation

At the heart of Albuquerque's community schools is the resource coordinator. As the person responsible for coordinating partnerships, making sure students are receiving the services they need and overseeing the implementation of programs, the resource coordinator takes the onus off teachers to be both social workers and educators, while at the same time respecting their expertise in the lives and needs of their students.

At Emerson Elementary School, that person is Rose Lopez. She wants to know which students need backpacks, which are coming to class hungry, and which seem distracted or unhappy. Lopez is responsible for building partnerships, relationships and trust among teachers, families and the community, and since she is working with students who come almost uniformly from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it's a big job.

School Board President Analee Maestas says that the key to implementing the community school model is hiring and training a resource coordinator, and then moving that person into the school. From there, the RC begins understanding the school's needs, assembling community resources and partnerships, and implementing the community school model in the school.

Lopez has frequent conversations with teachers about their students, and follows up on those discussions. She deploys resources toward children who need supports, whether it's as simple as finding a back-

pack or as complex as providing emotional counseling to students in need. "She provides amazing emotional support through love and attention," says kindergarten teacher Stephanie Walstrom, "and it makes an incredible impact on our students."

Providing Wraparound Services

Aside from providing emotional support, the school's resource coordinator coordinates a wide new range of services, just a handful of which are described below:

- ATF runs a program called Dial-A-Teacher. Knowing that a student's academic needs don't stop at the schoolhouse door, the union provides a paid staff of teachers, many of whom are bilingual, and all of whom are equipped with current textbooks from as many courses and grades as they can muster. When school is out, these teachers answer the phones and help students from across the district, state, and sometimes country, with their homework, promoting student success and leveling the playing field for those who might not otherwise have access to assistance with their nightly review. In addition, the ATF Dial-A-Teacher program is a perfect match to their Homework Diner (www.nbcnews.com/video/nightly-news/54186952) which is lead by teacher volunteers and the community school resource coordinator.
- The Boys & Girls Club provides a curriculum-aligned after-school program for elementary school students across the district. At Emerson Elementary, resource coordinator Rose Lopez coordinates meetings between Boys & Girls Club staff and teachers to ensure students are getting the coordinated supports they need. Getting students engaged with these programs at an early age helps keep kids on the right track to a lifetime of learning, and reinforces the ties with the community that are so vital to this program.
- Emerson Elementary School partnered with a local health clinic to provide much-needed health services to impoverished students who otherwise might not be able to afford medical care. The clinic, which operates in the school, also saves parents from having to take time off to transport their child to a separate facility, potentially putting a strain on family income and adding more stress to a community

that already suffers from intense poverty.

When schools have the ability to work with the community and address the barriers students and their families face, everyone benefits. When students are safe, healthy, and engaged, not only does the whole community grow stronger, but teachers can focus on teaching.

For more on partnerships and the services provided by Albuquerque community schools, see bit.ly/1E9EQGq.

Advice from the Field: A Complex Cure for a Complex Problem

The Albuquerque/Bernalillo Community School Partnership is the direct outcome of management and labor coming together to improve the lives and education of students. The success at Emerson Elementary sparked a brand new movement that is redefining the role of schools in their neighborhoods, and in doing so improving outcomes for students, teachers, and the community as a whole. With dedicated coordinators like Rose Lopez, passionate teachers like Stephanie Walstrom, and dedicated advocates like José Muñoz and Ellen Bernstein keeping the dialogue open among schools, their neighborhoods and their partners, there is nothing these programs can't achieve. "If the harmful reforms, the GERM [Global Education Reform Movements], are tearing down our schools by ignoring the effects of poverty and deprivation, then community schools are the cure," ATF President Bernstein says as we bring our conversation to a close, "because they can cure the symptoms that are holding us back."

ABC Executive Director Muñoz is likewise optimistic at the end of our interview, saying "I'm proud of our community schools because they are a complex answer to a complex problem, and while most people give up in the face of that kind of issue, and try to take the easy way out—usually by throwing money at it. I'm proud because our communities and our teachers and our providers have stuck it out for seven years, and we're seeing amazing outcomes because of it. I can't imagine what the next seven years will bring."

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