

A New Model for Student Success



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Opinion

Educators have long known that many Latino students do not complete high school. Still, education models have remained the same. It is imperative that school districts listen to students, teachers and parents and begin to implement new approaches. One such approach is the concept of a comprehensive community school. The driving force is a simple premise: Education does not occur in isolation from the rest of a student's life. Other factors –family, community, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and university partners - play an extremely important role in a child's successful education.

Schools cannot escape interdependence with outside factors that influence whether students learn. Schools must seize opportunities to connect students and families to resources and support, rather than lament the prevalence of outside negative influences. Connections with outside institutions reinforce a framework of effective educational accountability. While it is critical, for instance, to have a coherent focus on staff development and to emphasize the integration of reading skills throughout content areas in the curriculum, achievement is influenced not only by what happens inside the school but by what happens beyond its walls.

By expanding their boundaries, schools will become stronger and will engage parents and the community. Schools have the power to become the focus of the community, connected to daily lives and experiences, and thus can share the educational responsibility with other responsible partners. The meaningful extension of the school day is about providing the students with what they need to succeed. It is about helping them to capitalize on strengths and beat the odds so they grow up to be competent, caring and responsible. Extended learning opportunities must provide a variety of academic, social and recreational learning activities to accommodate different learning needs and styles.

There must be a seamless connection between what classroom teachers do during the traditional school hours and what happens

after school. Family and community engagement can be fostered through high school equivalency. ESL and literacy classes that reflect the needs of the community are needed. A partnership with a health agency would allow a school to offer health fairs, conferences and services to families. Parents working as literacy leaders can teach other parents and community residents.

Family support can be provided through counseling sessions and initiatives on financial education, neighborhood improvements, immigration rights, and community safety. It is within this framework that our model of a community school completed its second year. The creation of a new Community Links High School at Spry provides the opportunity for continuous family engagement. A high school model based on input from students, parents and teachers was implemented. Staffs were selected based on their commitment to student success and a nontraditional delivery of education. Neighborhood students must submit an application for admission, and their families must demonstrate students and families to resources and support, rather than lament the commitment to ensuring that they succeed.

Because teenagers respond better when they begin their classes at 10 or 11 a.m., classes begin later in the day. Students participate during their first year in a junior ROTC/physical education program that promotes teamwork, provides self-discipline and fosters respect and leadership. Service learning fosters student leadership. Students obtain work experience by serving as tutors and teacher assistants in the primary rooms. After this experience, they are placed at work sites in the school community. In traditional high schools, if students are caught in syndrome of failure, summers school is often used to make up failed classes. Our model allows students to attend school year-round and complete college entrance requirements in three years.

Early signs of success have begun to emerge, such as a very high attendance rate and no dropouts. Discipline issues are minimal or nonexistent. Parent engagement in school activities is very high. Students and families make a commitment to

complete high school and enroll in a postsecondary school. And starting their first year in high school, students also visit colleges and universities. In their third year, they all participate in a dual enrollment for college and high school credit. In June 2006, the first class will graduate from Community Links and continue postsecondary education.

An early-college community school is a way of thinking, acting and working together to educate students and strengthen families and communities. It is not an easy task but, as Lady Bird Johnson once said, "We cannot be cautious and extraordinary at the same time." Carlos M Azcoitia is Professor Emeritus at National Louis University. Dr. Azcoitia has been a teacher, Principal and Deputy Chief of Education in the Chicago Public Schools.



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