

Is the Concept of Full Service Community Schools Ready For Federal Support?

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An innovative, grassroots education reform movement is gaining momentum in small towns and large metropolitan areas across the country, according to **Joy Dryfoos, an independent education researcher**. Dryfoos dubs this a movement for "Full Service Community Schools" that finally "brings Jane Adams and John Dewey together," integrating social services and education under one roof. At the request of the American Youth Policy Forum, Joy Dryfoos spoke to policymakers about the research on this education reform initiative. **Sue Maguire, the Principal of the Molly Stark School in Bennington, Vermont**, joined Dryfoos to share her experiences in constructing a full service community school from the ground up. At the end of the presentations on education research and practice, policymakers discussed the legislative implications of the Full Service Community School reform movement.

Since 1984 the Carnegie Foundation has supported Joy Dryfoos's research on community school models. Her most recent report, *Evaluation of Community Schools: An Early Look*, summarizes research on 49 community school models. Dryfoos collected primarily unpublished research and raw data to ascertain which of these school programs was most effective. The programs in Dryfoos's report vary in form and structure. Some, like the Children's Aid Society and School of the 21st Century, are national in scope. Others, like the Molly Stark School in Bennington, Vermont or the Polk Brothers Foundation Full Service Schools in Chicago, Illinois, are local initiatives. As unique as each of these school reform models are, Dryfoos says that all exhibit the basic characteristics of full service community schools. These schools enlist the aid of various community members and groups to provide health and social services for youth and their families, so educators can focus on their primary mission, teaching. All of the full service community schools Dryfoos examined were:

- Public institutions
- Partnerships between schools and community-based organizations
- Focused on both academic achievement and youth development
- Engaged in community service and service learning
- Open all of the time—pre-school, after school, weekends, and summers
- Sites of family resource centers

Dryfoos argues that the full service community school movement is gaining momentum now because it addresses goals at the top of the national agenda for education reform. This movement speaks to concerns about high risk youth and those with behavior problems at the same time it incorporates much of the recent work on high standards. Full service community schools provide necessary services such as childcare, health care, nutrition, and counseling that are crucial supports for both parents and children. In addition, these schools bring parents, teachers, community members, and students together in a collaborative effort to strengthen education. All of these partners are invested in the success of full service community schools, and according to Dryfoos, they are making the initiative work every day in schools across the country. Of the 49 schools and programs that Dryfoos surveyed, 36 reported academic gains, 19 showed improved attendance, 12 had increased parent involvement, and 11 cited reduced suspensions. These national figures tell

only part of the story, however. Dryfoos's co-presenter showed policymakers what a full service community school looks like on the local level.

When Sue Maguire became the principal of Molly Stark School in Bennington, Vermont, she knew that she had accepted a challenge. Over half of the 440 pre-K through sixth grade students at Molly Stark come from low-income families. In the mid-1990s, the school faced a daunting list of problems, including: lack of academic success, high rates of absenteeism, physical and verbal aggression from students, lack of parent and student commitment, and high dropout rates. Maguire reported that though Molly Stark alumni comprise 12% of the students fed into the local middle school and high school, they make up 28% of the dropouts from these schools. Focus groups with teachers, administrators, parents, and community members produced a school reform model that offered comprehensive services to students and their families.

Maguire started small, implementing an after-school program with interested parents, teachers, and community members. Though some of these adults work voluntarily, Maguire pays the majority of after school staff at least a minimal salary (\$90 per eight-week session), because she believes that this gets them invested in the program. Molly Stark School now has an on-site garden, a Lego club, computer clubs, meteorology clubs, cooking clubs, and several other after school programs. Maguire instituted a mandatory homework club for students who were falling behind academically, but staffed it with one of the most popular teachers in the school, so that students would want to attend.

Once the after-school programs were up and running, Maguire added mentoring, health services, and evaluation to make sure that these programs were having a positive affect on Molly Stark students. High school and college students, as well as adults from the community pledge an hour a week for the year to serve as mentors. Companies, such as Prudential Life Insurance Corporation, give their employees time to come to school each week. Maguire was happy to recruit the Bennington Police Chief as a mentor. She likes to see him at the school in this capacity, rather than as a law enforcement officer or disciplinarian. The chief is not the only professional who works at the school, however. A pediatrician and psychologist see students and parents one-day each week, and a retired dentist from the area runs a practice out of the school. To fund and house these health facilities, Maguire attained a \$300,000 community development block grant in 1998 that supported the construction of a family center and the dental clinic on the school grounds. Additional funds came from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to support mentoring programs and from several private philanthropic organizations. Maguire and her colleagues have worked hard to fund and coordinate the services at their full service community school, and a preliminary evaluation conducted by Harvard researchers revealed that these efforts were succeeding. Absenteeism at Molly Stark dropped from 6.5% in 1998 to 5.3% in 2000. Student achievement on standardized tests has increased significantly as well.

With this local evidence and her own national survey of research on full service community schools, Joy Dryfoos argues that it is time for policymakers to take notice of this reform movement and begin supporting these initiatives. Her "wish list" for policymakers includes creating a Community School Authority with representatives from the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Justice and state agencies to award grants that will guide and support full service community schools. This Authority could provide technical assistance and capacity building services not only to start initiatives, but also to sustain them. Finally, it would promote visibility and research to insure that these schools achieve and maintain high standards.

Answering these challenges, congressional staffers gave informal presentations at the conclusion of Dryfoos's presentation on proposed legislation on full service community schools. **Elyse Wasch, a Legislative Assistant for Senator Jack Reed,** and **Dayle Lewis, Legislative Assistant for Representative Steny Hoyer,** both coordinated efforts on legislation related to these types of educational reforms. Representative Hoyer's bill entitled the "Full-Service Community Schools Act of 2001" would support school and community partnerships that offer a variety of services to facilitate youth development and academic achievement.

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