

Community schools can help break the cycle of poverty

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By [Ed Center / commentary](#)

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We've known for some time that children from low-income families are less likely to succeed in school relative to their higher-income peers. Many solutions to address this achievement gap have been explored, such as greater funding, more accountability for teachers or a longer school day. Yet as of 2012, 70 percent of the students who did not graduate from high school were living in poverty. Without a high school diploma, those students' chance at future success is small.

So, is our public education system incapable of serving our low-income kids? No, but we must rethink the relationship between education and poverty.

The [Local Control Funding Formula](#) is a step in the right direction, aiming to improve academic outcomes by providing greater funding to schools with high-needs students. It's also intended to give local school districts more control over the way they distribute their education dollars.

But as Professor Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University's Graduate School of Education [suggests](#), we need to take this work one step further. While flexibility of funding is critical, what we do with those funds is even more so. Investment in top-notch educators is essential when serving our highest-need students, but we must also invest in solutions that address the complex challenges that our low-income students bring to school.

Enter [community schools](#), which are revolutionizing the way we solve educational and poverty-related challenges. Community schools bring fragmented services found in the community – such as food assistance, health clinics and after-school programs – onto school campuses, integrating them into the core educational strategy. The challenges that students bring with them each day – hunger, homelessness, health issues, a parent in jail – are addressed by professionals offering specialized community-based services. That way children can focus on school, rather than an empty stomach or a nagging toothache, and teachers can focus on teaching, instead of serving as a caseworker for their students.

Today, community schools can be found across the country, and while there is no specific formula or set of requirements, they are all founded on the understanding that poverty creates barriers to learning that schools cannot ignore if all students are to have the same chance at success. The services provided by community schools vary depending on the needs and assets of the specific community. Many community schools have at least one health program (such as dental care), one after-school program and one parent engagement program (such as ESL

courses). The ideal community school has a lead nonprofit agency with a community liaison who makes it easy for families to access all of the needed services that are available.

Over the last decade, the community schools model has been gaining traction in low-income communities, especially as more and more data revealing their powerful impact emerges. For example, [13 years after the launch of Cincinnati's Community Learning Centers](#), citywide high school graduation rates have skyrocketed from 51% to 80% and the achievement gap between white and African American students has shrunk from 14.5% to 4%.

And superintendents looking for examples of success don't have to look far. In the Bay Area alone we count 63 thriving community schools, each incorporating its own unique blend of services required for its students and families. At [Hillcrest Elementary School](#) in San Francisco, a local community school, California Standardized Test scores rose across all grades from 2010-2013, jumping from 31% to 45% proficiency in English, 37% to 53% proficiency in math and 22% to 44% proficiency in science.

The Bay Area is rich in expertise in the community schools space, as well as funders looking to support this innovative work. As principals, superintendents and district administrators determine how to allocate their Local Control Funding Formula dollars in the coming months, I encourage them to consider investing in the community schools agenda. Through this work, we're able to navigate the complex needs of our low-income students by providing services like after-school programs, mental health services, food banks and more.

Low-income children will only get a fair chance at success if the connection between education and poverty is fully grasped and used as a launching point for change. By simultaneously confronting these issues, community schools create opportunities for students to break free from the cycle of poverty and create a better life, for themselves and for generations to come.

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Ed Center is Vice President of Education at [United Way of the Bay Area](#) and co-author of the report [Leveling the Playing Field: Community Schools Confront Poverty to Improve Student Success](#).