



The Children's Aid Society Community Schools

Vision and Mission: A community school is a public school that combines the best quality educational practices with a wide range of vital in-house health and social services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally and socially prepared to learn. Open early mornings, afternoons, evenings, weekends and summers, the community school serves as a true center of community life – a place where children attend classes, and can also receive medical and dental care, speak to a counselor about a problem and stay after school to build reading skills, play chess, work on a computer, take art and music lessons, get help with homework, practice sports and attend summer camp.

Parents and community leaders play active roles in the school. Parents are welcomed and encouraged to get involved in their children's education, as well as take adult education classes, get advice and support, learn how to help their children succeed in school, meet other parents and create their own programs, support groups and activities.

Essential to a community school's success is a committed partnership between the school and school district, a community organization and parents – a partnership that shifts the responsibility for student and family outcomes to a shared responsibility between partners. Partners come together to surround young people with three key sets of supports and opportunities: (1) A strong, coherent core instructional program during the regular school day; (2) Supports and services that address and seek to remove barriers to learning; and (3) Enrichment opportunities during non-school hours that build students' motivation and capacity to succeed in school.

In 1989, The Children's Aid Society (CAS) joined in an unprecedented partnership with the New York City Board of Education, the city's Community School District Six and other community-based partners to develop a comprehensive response to the pressing needs of children and families in the Northern Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights. Since 1992, The Children's Aid Society has partnered in five elementary schools, 14 intermediate schools and three high schools in Northern Manhattan and the Bronx. At these schools children and parents have numerous services available to them, including: adult education; immigration assistance; extended academic, sports, arts and development programs; child health insurance enrollment; medical and dental services; mental health services, early childhood programs; and community development.

Goals and Desired Results: The overarching goal of the CAS model of community schools is to promote children's learning and development in ways that prepare them for productive adulthood. Recognizing that children's learning and development is influenced by their ongoing experiences in their families, schools and communities, CAS community schools work to integrate the efforts of all three of these major influences through a partnership approach that addresses five sets of outcome domains: students; families; school; community; and education policy.

Distinguishing Characteristics of the Model: The CAS model is characterized by:

- *Comprehensiveness:* Its full-service approach is designed to address the multiple needs of children and families;
- *Coherence:* Joint planning and decision-making involves the major partners (school, CAS and parents) and intentionally seeks to integrate all aspects of the community school, particularly the school-day academic program and the before- and after-school enrichment program; and

- *Commitment:* CAS and its partner schools make a long-term commitment to work together with and on behalf of students and their families.

Primary Supports and Opportunities: In its full-service schools, the CAS-Board of Education partnership includes: an educationally rich core instructional program (that differs from school to school); before- and after-school enrichment programs that are integrated with the school-day curriculum; other academic supports; Saturday programs; summer camps; family involvement; social services; health, dental and mental health services; adult education; and community events. Two of the schools also offer Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Youth-oriented enrichment programs include arts, sports, community service and a variety of educational enrichment, such as chess clubs, science clubs and recycle-a-bicycle. Many of these enrichment programs utilize outside resources like the After-School Literacy Program (Developmental Studies Center), Foundations, Inc. and Project Learn (Boys and Girls Clubs of America).

Governance: The work at each school is guided by a School Leadership Team, which consists of Board of Education staff (principal, assistant principals, teachers), CAS staff and parents. These teams meet at least monthly for joint planning and decision-making. In addition, CAS has explicit written agreements with the New York City Board of Education and with the local community school districts in which its partnership schools are located (the New York City Board of Education is divided into 32 local school districts).

Staff and Professional Development Activities: Each CAS community school has a full-time director who works closely with the school's principal. Other key staff are: a full-time program director (CAS staff member); an education coordinator (Board of Education employee who works part-time for CAS); and a parent coordinator (employed by CAS). At each site, the program staff is comprised of teachers, youth workers, program specialists (such as dance teachers and artists), and high school and college students. Professional development activities include: orientation for new staff; monthly Community Schools Work Group meetings for site directors and other key staff; workshops offered through CAS, Boys and Girls Clubs of America (of which CAS is a member), the Partnership for After-School Education and The After-School Corporation.

Scope of Parent, Youth and Resident Participation: Parents, youth and other community residents are actively involved in all aspects of the community school, starting with the needs assessment process that initiates each school. For example, in one of our newer sites (PS 50 in East Harlem), the initial needs assessment included focus groups with parents, students and other community residents. Central to the CAS community school model is a Parent Resource Center—a place in the school where parents can socialize, get help and participate in workshops. Also central to the CAS model community-wide celebrations and events, such as the Dominican Heritage Celebration that annually draws hundreds of community residents to IS 218 in Washington Heights.

Strategies for Building Public Support and New Constituencies: At the District level, CAS staff participate in several task forces organized by the New York City Board of Education. At the community district level, we participate in monthly school board meetings. At the school level, we participate and help to facilitate the School Leadership Teams. In addition, we participate in city, state and national coalitions designed to build public support and new constituencies for community schools (such as the Coalition for Community Schools, the After-School Alliance, the New York State Coalition for After-School Funding, the New York State After School Network and the Partnership for After-School Education).

Results to Date: The two initial CAS community schools— PS 5 and IS 218 in Washington Heights— have been the focus of a six-year process and outcome evaluation conducted by researchers from Fordham University. The first three years primarily addressed formative issues, while during the next

three years, the evaluation addressed a variety of outcome issues, using a comparison design involving two other New York City public schools that were not community schools. Overall, key findings from these evaluations include: improvements in attendance and academic achievement; increases in parental involvement; reductions in suspensions; and improvements in attitudes toward school.

Specifically, students at both PS 5 and IS 218 showed improvement in math and reading scores. This was true for students who graduated in 1997 and for a cohort followed between 1996 and 1999, although 1998-9 test scores were not examined. There was some evidence that participation in the before- and after-school program correlated with improved test scores, but this was not fully investigated.

Students' self-perception ratings improved in both schools, and were particularly strong at PS 5 in terms of self-ratings of behavior and appearance. Attitudes toward school were more positive among community school students than among students attending comparison schools.

In relation to school environment and climate, interviews and observations consistently revealed that the schools themselves were different in their ambience from traditional school buildings. Parents and students felt welcome and the physical environment contributed to a sense of safety, order and cheerfulness. Both schools exhibited little or no violence or graffiti. Teachers, students and parents considered the schools "special" and felt they were safe places for children to be. Teachers in the community schools spent more time on class preparation and working with students than teachers in the comparison schools. Attendance rates were slightly higher at PS 5 and much higher at IS 218 than was average for comparable New York City schools. Teachers had improved attendance rates at community schools.

Finally, according to the Fordham researchers, the dramatic levels of parent involvement were among the most significant findings. Parent involvement was 78% higher at PS 5 than at a comparable elementary school; and was 147% higher at IS 218 than at a comparable middle school. At the community schools, parents took more responsibility for their children's school work, felt welcome and were observed to be a presence in the schools more than in the comparison schools. Parents also received many social services, attended adult education workshops and received medical services.

Expansion Strategy: In New York City, CAS's strategy has been to expand gradually, moving from an initial site in 1992 to eight sites in 2000, and continuing to grow at the rate of about one partnership per year—for a total of 22 schools as of March 2008. Our other expansion strategy has revolved around providing technical assistance and training to schools and community groups around the country that want to learn from and adapt the CAS model to their own local needs and circumstances. Since 1994, CAS has operated the National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools, which received initial financial support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Over 10,000 visitors have come to see and learn from our Washington Heights schools since that time. To date, approximately 12,000 other community schools nationally and internationally have adapted the CAS model. Other expansion strategies have included: an Ad Council campaign co-sponsored by the Coalition for Community Schools, designed to educate the public about the value of the community schools approach; and partnerships with national organizations, including Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the Public Education Network and the Milton Eisenhower Foundation, to use their national reach to increase the number and quality of school-community partnerships nationally.

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