

## **Case Study on Building Capacity San Mateo County Community Schools Initiative**

*Much education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants.*

*Community and youth development go hand in hand: a community prospers only when its young people prosper, and young people flourish only in a flourishing community.*

John W. Gardner, Former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare

### **Brief History**

In 2003, the National Center for Community Schools entered into a collaborative venture with the John Gardner Center (JGC) at Stanford University and Center for Community Partnerships at UC Davis to develop a cohort of five community schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, beginning with two communities, Redwood City and Coastside in San Mateo County Mid-Coast. The JGC had previously worked with some of these sites on other youth development-related projects. JGC sought to work on two levels—to work with community partners individually to build capacity around integrating youth development into school reform; and to bring partners together to increase regional capacity around this issue.

### **Capacity-Building Activities**

To build regional capacity around the integration of school, family and community, the JGC developed the Academy for Community Schools Development (ACSD). JGC provided the financial support for its technical assistance partners (Children's Aid and UC-Davis) to co-create and co-deliver the ACSD curriculum—a sequential nine-session training course offered over a three-year period to leadership teams from the five participating schools. The curriculum revolved around core topics that would assist the teams in transforming their schools from traditional to community schools. The training sessions were offered by presenters from each of the three partners as well as provide local resources that could continue to work with the sites.

In addition to the intensive work done at each of the nine all-day Academy sessions, the sites received ongoing assistance, as needed. Each community was supported by a JGC Community Partnership Liaison who worked closely with the respective community throughout the three-year process. The UC-Davis team provided local support and resources, while CAS provided community schools experience and knowledge, especially around the operational aspects of running a community school.

As the initiative developed, several issues surfaced that needed to be addressed in order to facilitate the development of community schools in the two districts. One was that, as the leadership teams worked on implementing the community schools strategy at their individual sites, it became clear that systemic support was also needed at a higher tier of management (district and county levels) that would facilitate and undergird what the sites were doing. It became important to identify and involve other key stakeholders who could make resources and policy decisions that would support changes at the site level.

A second issue was that the sites were developmentally at very different stages and would benefit from more customized assistance between the trainings. Also, the technical assistance partners recognized a need to build capacity not only among the school sites but also with the Community Partnership Liaisons at the Gardner Center. The technical assistance partners offered to participate in quarterly site visits to each of the schools in addition to conducting the trainings. CCP would be available as the local resource. The provision of additional assistance at several levels was an important complement to the trainings that helped to resolve implementation issues as they arose.

A key decision that gave an early boost to the initiative involved repositioning Family Resource Coordinators at the designated Redwood City schools to take on the duties of a Community School Director and work directly with the school administrator to partner on the community school agenda at their site.

### **Results to Date**

The five schools continue to sustain their initiatives through support by top leadership in their respective county departments or school districts. All of the sites continue to offer and coordinate an impressive array of programs and services that have been sustained through collaboration with established networks in their districts and successful partnerships. In 2006, Cunha Middle School—the participating Coastside site—received additional funds from the Stuart Foundation and the Gardner Center for their Community School Model. Two of the five original schools (Cunha and Kennedy) are being developed as demonstration or “proof of concept” schools, as part of a larger effort to develop a county-wide policy that supports community schools in San Mateo County.

### **Lessons Learned**

- *Collaboration*: Each district was able to build on existing networks, which facilitated the collaboration among key partners. Redwood City 2020 and the Peninsula Partnership goals are to support the success of all youth and families and to engage and strengthen the community. Those resources were leveraged to provide key networks of support for the community schools. In the early stages, many of the partners attended the ACS D to learn more about the concept and identify steps to organizing their resources into a cohesive whole. While the partners learned that relationship-building took more time than they had initially anticipated, they came to recognize that the time was well spent and helped to fuel the sustainability of their efforts.
- *Comprehensiveness*: The sites learned how to conduct a thorough needs assessment and to use that analysis to develop appropriate site-specific responses. For Cunha, the Superintendent was key in calling together the county’s department heads to discuss how they would go forward together to provide needed services systemically to all schools in the district.
- *Coordination/Integration*: The ACS D provided a forum for uniting key stakeholders to do joint planning and decision-making. Teams made faster progress when they worked together in between the quarterly Academy sessions, in order to maintain momentum and staying on task. The availability of ongoing technical assistance also helped the stakeholders remain invested and focused.
- *Commitment*: The initiative generated and maintained commitment from the districts’ superintendents from the start. It took more time to gain buy-in from some of the other district staff, although many of them attended the ACS D sessions. Some individuals were present but not really engaged and a tended to view the Academy sessions and follow-up as another responsibility being added to an already-full plate. On the other hand, the parents who participated as team members were fully engaged and responsive to the process and invested in seeing outcomes for their children and for themselves.