

Education coalition unveils community school agenda

By Erin Uy

Education stakeholders have launched a plan that would extend accountability for student development and postsecondary readiness to a community of service providers, including health care professionals and educators.

A coalition of education groups Wednesday unveiled The Community Agenda for America's Public Schools, a policy plan intended to engage and link branches of child development services to support community schools. The agenda underscores pushback from some education leaders who say NCLB accountability provisions have narrowed the definition and value of child development and achievement to solely focus on academics.

"Community schools tackle out-of-school factors that affect student achievement by providing vital services," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, a coalition partner. "If we don't make this happen, we won't close the achievement gap," she said.

Grounded in the whole child movement, the policy calls on education stakeholders of all levels, including grassroots and congressional, to "move us beyond the divisive 'either-or' debate" that forces academic and social development priorities to compete, said Martin Blank, director of the Coalition for Community Schools, a K-16 community planning group.

The Community Agenda calls for coordination among agencies to provide counselors, health care professionals and other social services professionals based in schools. In turn, the supporting agencies would foster an environment that allows teachers to better educate students, Blank said.

School leaders and teachers are overextended, Weingarten added. For instance, the dearth of school nurses has imposed a significant burden on other school staff who must deal with student health issues outside of their expertise, she said. On average, one school nurse is responsible for meeting the needs of 1,200 students, Weingarten said.

Policy recommendations

Groups at the local level have led the charge for community schools. For instance, a coalition of business and philanthropic leaders, in con-

Other high-profile efforts

While The Community Agenda for America's Public Schools calls for greater national attention to the community schools movement, recent initiatives have attempted to shine the spotlight on the benefits of such schools.

Some in Congress have pushed for greater awareness of the issue. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., in August introduced S. 3431, the Time for Innovation Matters in Education Act. The bill includes a provision that encourages partnerships between schools and community organizations.

The Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, announced in June, also calls for an approach to student accountability that includes whole child support. The initiative does not reject accountability and school improvement but says other measures — such as high-quality early education, an extended school day, and full-service school clinics — are critical to help low-income students achieve.

junction with Chicago Public Schools, created the Chicago Community Schools Initiative. The venture raised private money along with matching district funds to create community schools. Almost seven years after the initiative's inception, 150 community schools serve Chicago.

Community Agenda leaders seek federal leadership to drive a national conversation on the issue. Local agencies "can only go so far with their ingenuity," Blank said.

The Community Agenda suggests policies that create incentives for government, community and business to partner and participate in community schools efforts. Moreover, reflecting the holistic education strategy, The Community Agenda suggests a new, broader approach to student accountability.

According to the agenda, "a single, standardized test should not be the only basis for judging schools or students." Instead, the agenda states a student's social wellness, health, attendance and other non-academic indicators, alongside academic achievements, should account for student development.

The education system has made the mistake of creating a "narrow definition of student achievement," said Warren Simmons, executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.



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