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Case Study: Community Schools

1. Title: SUN Community Schools

2. Location and Dates of Operation: Multnomah County, Oregon. Founded 1999.

3. Abstract

   1. SUN Community Schools are part of the SUN Service System, which is a streamlined community service delivery system for Multnomah County, Oregon, which includes the city of Portland. SUN stands for "Schools Uniting Neighborhoods." SUN services are accessed at the system's 80 SUN Community School locations, 6 regional service centers and other community sites. The overarching theory is that each location is a full-service neighborhood hub where community members come together to enhance everyone's lives. The partnership with various Parks and Recreation departments and the mission of providing better recreation opportunities for everyone in the community makes this case relevant for our work this semester. The model also emphasizes positive social and health outcomes for both students and the larger community, making the schools into an agent of neighborhood transformation.

4. Type of Case: Community School

   1. The school district's criteria: "SUN Community Schools mobilize and strategically organize community resources to provide:

      1. Strong core instructional program

      2. Educational support and skill development for youth and adults

      3. Enrichment and recreation activities

      4. Family involvement and support

      5. Social, health and mental health resources

      6. Family and community events"

5. Mission and Goals

   1. Goals: educational success for children, wrap-around social and health support service systems, and enrichment and recreational opportunities for children and their parents.

   2. Mission: To create and sustain full-service neighborhood hubs where the school and community come together to make sure kids and families have what they need to be successful in school and life.

6. Context: Origins, Organization, and Operation: How did the case get started? Who are the participants and how do they work together (what is the internal organizational structure)? What are the sources of support? Who are the partners external to the organization? What external policies or entities, if any, contributed to its origins and operation?

   1. The SUN School System operates within the Multnomah Education Service District, which oversees the 8 public school districts in Multnomah County.

2. Origins: The Portland Bureau of Parks and Recreation had already begun offering enhanced recreational opportunities at 13 schools, so they became a key partner. Another asset was Multnomah County's history of providing school-based services, including health clinics, case managers, family resource centers, and mental health workers. Local non-profits had also begun doing their own work partnering with schools to expand schools' presence in communities. In the late 1990s, city and county officials came together to better coordinate and streamline their efforts, and the SUN Service System was born. The Community Schools are just one component (albeit the largest) of the system. Most services are provided through schools because they are a logical neighborhood node that is generally accessible to everyone. The program started with 8 schools, selected through an RFP process. During the planning process, 108 total schools within the MESD were identified as high need schools. The end goal, therefore, is to turn all 108 schools into community schools. Not all Multnomah County schools are community schools, but there are currently 80 schools (of all levels) that fall within the model. They have added to the number of schools over the years, contingent on how much funding the Multnomah County government, the City of Portland, and other entities are willing or able to give to the program. Last year, the county announced it would make the funding for some of these schools permanent.[1]

3. Organizational structure: Each school has a full-time site manager on staff, solely dedicated to running the extra programs in coordination with the lead agency. The site manager and lead agency (local non-profit) works closely with the school's principal to organize and carry out all activities. In addition to the lead agency, there are a number of other for- and non-profit entities that support each school in terms of helping provide one or more of the many services that each school provides to the students and the community. The addition of new schools is also dependent on securing a lead agency and other supporting organizations.

7. Programs: food and clothing pantries; rent and utilities assistance; home weatherization resources; extended after-school activities; community health centers; free or reduced breakfast, lunch, and dinner for qualifying students; mentoring, tutoring, and homework help; adult education including nutrition, parenting, and financial literacy courses; enrichment groups including chess, gardening, nature service learning, and drama; community and cultural events including walk and bike to school days, ethnic holiday festivals, and multilingual parent info sessions; and many more.

1. Elementary example: Buckman School has a food and clothing donation and distribution center within it

2. Middle school example: H. B. Lee Middle School has youth leadership groups, Latino parent night every month, financial literacy adult education courses

3. High school example: Centennial High School has a community health center on the grounds, free breakfast/lunch/dinner for qualifying students

8. Assessment

1. SWOT:

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[1] "SUN Schools program to add 10 sites."

1. Strengths: The SUN system is supported by a wide network of government agencies and organizations. Even more crucial, however, is that it was created by entities that already had a history of collaborating with each other and with local schools. This context gives the program and the schools a lot of support and stability. The program is proving to be successful and has achieved political support, so much so that it has received permanent funding from the county. Another strength is that despite its structure as a regional-scale program, each community school's programming is tailored to the needs of the local area. They were able to achieve replicability and personalization at the same time.

2. Weaknesses: In terms of what we're looking for in a model program, there is no emphasis on place-based education despite the involvement of the entire community in each school; there is also no specific program to improve schoolyards or implement green infrastructure.

3. Opportunities: Obviously there is an opportunity to continue expanding the program so that eventually all 108 targeted schools have these extra programs.

4. Threats: As they expand the program they will need to keep finding the (hopefully permanent) funding to support more and more activities and staff; there is always the threat of a shift in political winds and a pulling of support; at times the supporting agencies have pushed back against being asked to run programs that are outside their core mission statement.

9. Lessons for Philadelphia: What are the lessons for our project?

   1. This case is helpful because it is close to a district-scale transformation, as opposed to a single school. It is helpful to look at what entities came together in a partnership to make this large of a model into a reality. The way they achieved it was through having a plan and an end goal, starting small, and adding schools once they secured the funding and site partners.

   2. There is a level of nuance embedded in the program, despite the scalability of the program. SUN helps their local partners provide services targeted to people in the school's geographic area. In this way the actual services are overseen in a centralized way, but each school's services are tailored to the neighborhood. Therefore each school is able to focus on what their community needs most— health, safety, workforce training, etc.

   3. The program has vigilantly kept track of progress and has measured various indicators over time that prove its success. Being able to prove that something works will help it gain support in the public's eyes as well as those in power. It is important to embed measurable benchmarks and outcomes into the design of a program.

   4. The program is recognized for having staying power despite changes in political and school leadership, economic downturn, and budget cuts. The director of the Coalition for Community Schools pointed to the shared responsibility among many different organizations as one of the key reasons for its longevity. It seems they have achieved a level of integration and buy-in from diverse stakeholders that we have acknowledged as being crucial to the success of our model program.

Sources

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