



Collaborating for student success | *Mary Ellen Havel-Lang*

What happens when 16 under-achieving fourth- and fifth-graders are tutored twice a week by high school students or students are taught how to use a crock pot? What does it look like when financial literacy is discussed with adults while their school-aged children are with mentors and their preschool children are provided child care? Sun Prairie is finding out.

The community school initiative began in Sun Prairie during January 2012, at two sites — an elementary school and alternative high school “community.”

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved

student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone — all day, every day, evenings and weekends.

“Community schools are an inspiring grassroots collaboration involving many people and organizations in our community,” said Tim Culver, district administrator. “It has united many elements of our community in support of children and families.”

■ Collaboration

Community schools are all about collaboration. About three years ago, the City of Sun Prairie’s Youth and Families Commission completed an assessment of the school district, with an emphasis on growth, the increase in diversity, youth criminal activity, education, and activities for youth. Once the report was published, the commission was approached by the YMCA of Dane County, which introduced the community schools concept. Representatives from the commission and the YMCA spoke with Culver and introduced the initiative. Community leaders were gathered to discuss the direction the community was



headed, diversity, poverty, and whether this was going to be a good step. After several Saturday morning meetings, these leaders gave the go ahead.

The non-profit YMCA stepped up to be the fiscal agent for the effort. There is a formal memorandum of understanding between the school district and the YMCA to address roles and responsibilities, use of the buildings, insurance, and program management.

Since that initial partnership with the City of Sun Prairie and the YMCA, we now have 26 community partners. Some approached us, some we approached.

“One of the great experiences of working in a community school

effort is realizing that meeting a need that has been identified is not contingent on one organization’s ability but rather realizing that the strengths of many organizations can lead to great and fast results when we work together,” said Dan Moritz, YMCA’s community schools manager.

■ Funding through Partnerships

Philosophically, a commitment has been made that students and their families should be able to participate in programs for free or at little cost. Most of our partners do provide services in that manner. The objective is to have people participate.

This leads to the money question — where is the funding coming from? We started small. There was a three-year commitment from Summit Credit Union. Madison Community Foundation funded a grant request, again, for three years. Our elementary site has been adopted by a UW fraternity, which sponsored a fundraising dinner dance. Local service organizations have provided monetary and volunteer support. Additionally, the school district and YMCA have provided in-kind staff and monetary support.

We partnered with Herzing University’s Principles of Marketing class, which provided three marketing plans. This not only benefits the initiative, but gives the students

Since the initial partnership with the YMCA, the City of Sun Prairie now has 26 community partners.



real-life scenarios in which to spend class time. We are also partnering with Herzing University for our logo contest. As a result of our work with Herzing, their academic dean has joined our executive team, which helps guide the program.

The governance structure is a thing to behold. There are six teams that meet regularly: executive; fund development; assessment, outcome and evaluation; communication and marketing; site leadership; and community engagement. Staff from the school district and YMCA participate along with the city, parents, students, businesses, service organizations, the faith-based community, and community members. There is one paid staff — the program manager — who is an employee of the YMCA. Programming and planning is led by each site leadership team. These teams consist of the program manager, principal, students, grandparents, parents, and school staff. The programming is based on needs assessments from parents and students, with input from the school staff — the “community.”

■ Student Success

Now back to those results. Here’s what happened with the reading and math scores last year of Westside Elementary School fourth- and fifth-graders who participated in the Kids Achieve Together (KAT) program:

“The data on our first year of KAT suggests that the achievement gap in reading narrowed for participants,” said Principal Rick Mueller.

While the mean reading growth for all fourth- and fifth-grade students at Westside Elementary School was 9.7 points (more than one year growth) the mean growth of students involved in KAT was 13.4.

This after-school program also provides a healthy snack and a half hour of physical activity. Anecdotally, teachers said their students were more eager to be at school and more prepared for class when they participated in the program.

One of the KAT volunteers is Luke Waldbillig. Luke is a senior at Sun Prairie High School, vice-chair

MORE INFORMATION ON Community Schools

Visit the Coalition of Community Schools at communityschools.org for more on the community schools model.

Other Websites:

Sun Prairie Community Schools:
[http://ymcadanecounty.org/
community-schools-news](http://ymcadanecounty.org/community-schools-news)

Illinois Federation of
Community Schools:
<http://ilcommunityschools.org/>

of the Youth and Families Commission, and very active in the administration of community schools.

“As a volunteer, it is the people that keep me coming back,” Luke said. “Seeing the smile on a kid’s face who just had fun spending nearly 12 hours at school, the gratefulness of a mom who is taking a class that she wouldn’t be able to take otherwise, and the passion of

my fellow volunteers really inspire me to stay involved in my community and give to something that will far outlast me.”

The students at our alternative high school were able to keep their crock pots if they completed the class. One can smell the fruits of their labors during the day when they cook for the school attendees and staff.

According to Wendi Tavs, principal at the Prairie Phoenix Academy, the community school model brings many needed resources to the school. The school gets outside help with student factors that include: poverty; onset of mental health conditions, usually occurring in late teens; self-medicating with alcohol or drugs for anxiety or depression; single family home structure; and, trauma experienced earlier in life that they have not worked through.

“Some of the most common examples are loss of a parent, continual verbal abuse, addictive parent in the household, and transient life styles — many students have been to four or more school districts in their life time,” Tavs said.

Services at the community school are based on these needs and those identified via assessments completed by the students and their caregivers. This makes each site tailored to meet the needs of their “community.”

“Every aspect of community schools in Sun Prairie is focused on providing opportunities to students and families who need them, but also to those who want them that have the desire to succeed at whatever comes their way,” Waldbillig said. “It’s more than just an after-school program or a cooking class; it’s a community lifestyle and a complete paradigm shift to holistic care of the community.” ■

Mary Ellen Havel-Lang was a member of the Sun Prairie School board for 12 years; serving five years as president. She was also a member of the WASB Board of Directors. She is currently the Chair of the Sun Prairie Youth and Families Commission.



“As a volunteer, it is the people that keep me coming back.

Seeing the smile on a kid’s face who just had fun spending nearly 12 hours at school, the gratefulness of a mom who is taking a class that she wouldn’t be able to take otherwise, and the passion of my fellow volunteers ...”

— **Luke Waldbillig**, Sun Prairie High School senior and vice-chair of the Youth and Families Commission