

EVANSVILLE, INDIANA: From One School to an Entire District

The Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC) (a school district in Evansville, Indiana) launched its community schools initiative in one school and has since expanded it to include all 34 schools under its jurisdiction. Demonstrating the community's commitment to community schools, the school district has embraced the community schools strategy despite considerable turnover in superintendents. Superintendent Dr. Vince Bertram took the community schools strategy to a new level by engaging the community in listening sessions and responding to the community's concerns. He made Family, School, and Community Partnerships a core element of the EVSC strategic plan. Even with Dr. Bertram's recent announcement of his departure, the Board of School Trustees remains committed to finding a new leader who will continue to expand the community schools initiative.

Starting at Cedar Hall Elementary

In 1991, a group convened by the United Way of Southwestern Indiana reported that drug and alcohol abuse and support for families leaving welfare were major concerns in Evansville. When research indicated that after-school programming was a successful response to these problems, the group identified four high-risk, high-poverty EVSC elementary schools for enhanced after-school programming: Cedar Hall, Lincoln, Delaware, and Culver. In partnership with the United Way and with additional funding from the Lilly Endowment, each school began to develop after-school programs in partnership with youth-serving agencies.

In 1994, seeing the success of these collaborative efforts in the elementary schools, Cedar Hall Principal Cathlin Gray drew on the work of Joy Dryfoos to develop a vision of a full-service school infrastructure. Dryfoos advised the Evansville leadership team to visit communities across the country that had instituted full-service schools. Inspired by its visit, the team began to create the Cedar Hall Model. Soon, community collaborations at Cedar Hall offered GED classes, pre-school programs, counseling and in-house therapy, social work services, and community beautification programs as well as after-school programs in partnership with the YMCA, YWCA, 4-H, and Girl Scouts, just to name a few.

In 1995, Gray took a decisive step to take the Cedar Hall Model community-wide. She convened a meeting of community members and potential partners to form what became the district's first school-based Site Council. Meeting weekly, the council used Kretzmann and McKnight's *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* to conduct a comprehensive survey of the community's assets and challenges. Formal partnerships took shape, focused around a central goal: to meet the needs of Cedar Hall students and families effectively and efficiently. Some early Site Council members included the United Way, the Southwest Indiana Mental Health Center, the local neighborhood association, the Salvation Army, juvenile court, St. Mary's Hospital, the Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the Indiana Division of Family and Children, and Lampion, a family and child service agency.

Starting in 1996, Cedar Hall's efforts began to spark interest throughout the school district. That year, the EVSC Board of School Trustees passed a formal resolution that designated Cedar Hall as the first full-service community school. The resolution underscored Cedar Hall's significant impact on the lives of children and families. The following year, Cedar Hall and the United Way co-sponsored a conference for stakeholders from across the state to help them learn about school and community collaboration as seen through the eyes of national experts.

Cedar Hall was starting something big and people around the state were watching. In 1999, the

Indiana Department of Education supported an evaluation of the full-service strategy at Cedar Hall; the following year, Senator Evan Bayh recognized the school with a visit. Cedar Hall began to receive more national grants and national recognition based on its successful outcomes.

Expansion Begins

In 2000, a U.S. Department of Education 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grant enabled five district schools, including Cedar Hall, to hire site coordinators to expand their after-hours activities into year-round enrichment programs, offering activities after school, on weekends, and during the summer. With the support of their site coordinators, the schools began to form their own site councils, mirroring the Cedar Hall approach. A special feature of the grant allowed the schools to institute social work services through St. Mary's Healthcare Services. St. Mary's created a Mobile Outreach Health Clinic and began delivering health services to underserved communities in the Evansville area.

The success of Cedar Hall's full-service model was becoming increasingly evident. A state-funded program evaluation of Cedar Hall found that test scores increased by nearly 15 percent in the school year immediately following implementation of the full-service model.

Moving Forward with the Superintendent's Leadership

Determined to find a better way to maximize community resources and seeing the success of Cedar Hall, school officials worked to expand the model. Then-Superintendent Dr. Phil Schoffstall envisioned a community-wide meeting place for organizations concerned with children and families. In 2000, he promoted Principal Gray to the central office as the Title I director and charged her with systematically expanding the full-service community schools model across all EVSC schools. In 2001, the district expanded the model to 10 schools through a second 21st CCLC grant. In 2004, EVSC received a Safe Schools Healthy Student grant that helped expand the strategy into all district schools.

The work was growing and showing great success. Community partners were joining Evansville's community schools movement. Still, the work needed to be more intentional and required a higher level of coordination. In 2001, community partners and the EVSC formed the School Community Council (SCC). The SCC's mission is "to establish school sites as places of community to enhance youth and family development." Community agencies work together at the SCC level, much like site councils work at the school level, to integrate resources targeted to children and families. The SCC developed a detailed strategic plan that specified goals, objectives, and outcomes.

Subcommittees, or Strategic Goal Teams, began addressing topics such as cultural diversity, access to services and programs, health and wellness, and evaluation. In the years since the SCC's formation, the council has grown from 50 to more than 70 members.

The Welborn Baptist Foundation began supporting the SCC's work in 2001, allocating funds to create the infrastructure needed to support the expansion of the community schools strategy throughout the district, with a focus on health and wellness. In 2002, Bart McCandless was appointed superintendent. In one of his earliest decisions, he elevated Evansville's SCC initiatives to a new level by creating the position of assistant superintendent of federal projects, with Gray in that role. She assumed responsibility for all school-financed health and social services, after-school programs and related activities, and the coordination of federal, state, and other monies. This organizational shift bundled the funding and coordination of school-managed resources, allowing the school district to use its funds strategically to coordinate with community partners.

Today, EVSC blends a variety of federal funds to support its community schools, including Title I; Title I School Improvement Grants; 1003 G—School Improvement; Special Education; Title II—Professional Development; Title III—English Language Learner; Title IV—Safe and Drug Free; Even Start and Head Start; Centers for Disease Control; 21st Century Community Learning Centers; Carol M. White Physical Education Grant; Grant to Reduce Alcohol Abuse; Safe School/Healthy Students; McKinney Vento Homeless Grant; and Full-Service Community Schools grant. EVSC demonstrates that funding can support a district's community schools strategy in lieu of creating programs to fit the available funding. In this way, EVSC is always moving toward its goal of creating more community schools.

In spring 2007, Dr. Vince Bertram was appointed EVSC superintendent. The SCC played an active role with the school board to ensure that the new superintendent would support the drive toward community schools. Bertram fulfilled the council's expectations. He immediately engaged the community in over 250 listening sessions, even midnight sessions so that parents who worked two jobs could participate. Out of those sessions, the district developed a strategic plan that addressed five core areas: early childhood education, technology, professional development, innovative school models, and family, school, and community partnerships. Bertram also established the position of associate superintendent for family, school, and community partnerships, raising the status of community schools even higher in the district.

Evansville Today

Evansville has achieved its goal of systematic adoption of the partnership approach in all district schools. All EVSC schools are on the continuum of community schools development. Significantly, the community schools strategy has become fully integrated into the district from the central office down to the individual school. Associate Superintendent Cathy Gray said:

We want to change the way we do business as a corporation and change how we think about communities and schools working together. This is about a process, about collaboration. Each school has its own identity, so it's important to create an infrastructure where we open the doors to community collaboration and see what comes up at each site.

Evansville's community schools effort continues to enjoy vigorous support from its superintendent. Speaking at a U.S. Department of Education briefing in February 2011, Bertram said, "Education is a complex enterprise. Meeting our children's academic, social, emotional, and health needs is a shared responsibility. That is why family, school, and community partnerships are at the core of our district's strategic plan, and we are dedicating substantial resources to support this work."

As with most initiatives, EVSC is constantly evaluating and reassessing its work. In spring 2011, EVSC hired a director of full-service community schools, another position that will support the district's strategy. The school district and community partners are reassessing the composition and responsibilities of the SCC, with a focus on creating a robust steering committee that will set the agenda for the community schools strategy. By constantly assessing progress and deeply engaging the community, EVSC is revising its leadership plan and action steps to ensure that community schools continue to be the centerpiece in helping students succeed for years to come.

Excerpted from the Coalition for Community Schools Scaling Up Guide: Case studies. 2011. www.communityschools.org//resources/part_four_case_studies_overview.aspx.