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Please Don't Leave Your Children's Education to Us Alone

Jan Resseger

Last winter I was privileged to visit New York City's Primary School (PS) 5, where I saw a program that brings hope to families. PS 5 is a Community School, part of an alliance of over 3,000 partnerships nationwide that link social agencies with a public school.

In New York City, the 150-year-old Children's Aid Society coordinates 19 Community Schools, including 5 elementary, 11 middle and 3 high schools, in East Harlem, the South Bronx, and Washington Heights. In every Community School, a lead partner manages the involvement of other partners.

Our group met in the Parent Room, where our chairs bumped against commercial sewing machines used by a parent class. Our orientation session was interrupted as students arrived to pick up cooking equipment and ingredients for an after school-cooking club from parent coordinator, Nayaday Cruz. Ms. Cruz's primary job is to be visible in the neighborhood and to help parents organize parent-friendly activities. All staff at PS 5 share the following message with parents: "Please don't leave the education of your children to us alone. If you do, they will not do as well and some will fail. We must do this together."

Early Head Start teachers described regular home visits and weekly classes at school where parents practice helping babies develop language and motor skills. The Early Head Start teachers, as certified Doulas, accompany many expectant mothers through childbirth before the babies enter the program. Head Start for pre-schoolers serves 75 children each day in half, full, and extended-day programs.

Sixteen after-school clubs engage over 300 children every day—dancing Dominican style, producing plays, learning computer skills, playing

chess, swimming, Lego Engineering, cooking, and gardening in a whimsical space filled with flowers and vegetables. A Saturday program serves 80 children, and a camp program extends enrichment into the summer.

The school houses a health, mental health, and dental clinic, staffed daily by a nurse practitioner along with a physician every two weeks. The clinic immunizes children, provides physical exams, cleans and fills teeth, and evaluates emotional problems. Referrals are made to specialists at nearby hospitals. Open from 8:30 AM until 4:30 PM and all summer, the clinic serves more than 800 children enrolled at PS 5, along with over 1,200 children from the neighborhood. A licensed clinic, it bills Medicaid directly. Health professionals mingle in all parent activities, and an insurance specialist comes weekly to help eligible families apply for insurance.

The Children's Aid Society weaves together public funding (Head Start, Medicaid, a 21st Century After-School Grant and others) and philanthropic and private grants, which means all Community Schools in New York City benefit together without competing against one another.

I watched this Community School do its part to close achievement gaps by supporting families who struggle to patch together food stamps, Medicaid, and childcare subsidies. Some of these services are provided and others coordinated right at the public school on the corner. The partnership has helped make the neighborhood public school a warm community that nurtures children, welcomes parents, and supports teachers.

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