

What Can Your Church Do Through Partnership to Support Children, Teachers and Your Public Schools?

Be supportive of public education by getting in the habit of thinking about your public schools. Familiarize yourselves with the school near your church.

Pray for the children in your schools, their teachers, and their families.

Celebrate public school educators at a worship service each September.

Share news about your local schools and the school accomplishments of children in your congregation in your newsletter or your bulletin.

Bring a friend to a musical performance, a play or a sporting event in your neighborhood public school.

If you haven't been to a public school in awhile, make an appointment for a group from your congregation to visit. Here is a link to a guide for setting up your visit: <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Experiencing-Public-Schools.pdf>. You will see good things happening all around you.



Partner your congregation with a public school.

Create programming for your congregational-school partnership in the spirit of true collaboration. Develop your ideas through joint visioning among the principal, your pastor, your church volunteers, and the school's staff. Here are some ideas to get you started; the possibilities are as wide as your imagination.

Donate backpacks filled with school supplies every September for the children whose parents cannot afford required school supplies.



Invite your congregation's knitting ministry to knit hats, scarves, and mittens for one class at a time in your partner school. Have fun with this project. Buy yarn in bright colors the children will enjoy.

Provide volunteers to read with children. Reading aloud is a fun literacy activity. Children benefit from a warm, loving relationship with an adult who will read to them and listen to them read. Volunteers need to plan to be a consistent presence for assigned children throughout the school year.

Provide weekly math tutors. Volunteers need to plan to be a consistent presence for assigned children throughout the school year.

In collaboration with teachers, design a math lab at the school. Collect math manipulatives and other resources recommended by the school. Voluntarily staff your math lab at lunch time, after school, one evening per week or even on Saturday. Involve parents if possible. Think with the children about how math is used in business, in science, and even in sewing, cooking, or carpentry.



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See our public education justice pages at: <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education>.

Correspondence through e-mail is a literacy activity. With the principal's or a teacher's help, figure out how to pair students and volunteers in your congregation as e-mail buddies through the school's classroom computers or computer lab. Have your volunteers correspond via e-mail with these students once or twice per week.

Provide volunteers for the school's computer lab. Can you make it possible to keep this lab open longer, at lunch, after school or on Saturday morning? Develop a program in which the children at the school can help your congregation's senior citizens or the children's grandparents learn how to use the computer.

Or, if your church is close to the school, open your congregation's computer lab to children and families in the neighborhood for special hours each week.

If your partner school has no library, provide books (perhaps in collaboration with the public library) for a lunch time lending library in the school's cafeteria. Provide volunteers to manage this activity.

Collect a special offering to buy a book for each child in the school to have at the end of the school year as a start on a home-library. Have the school librarian select books appropriate to the children's interests and reading levels.

Provide volunteers for special activities at your partner school—the science fair, history day, young authors, a music competition, a carnival. Senior citizens can become the subjects of oral history or connect students to other primary sources from an earlier time.

Open an after school program or a summer literacy program in your church. Focus on reading for fun, but also introduce activities like sports, gardening, music, carpentry, or computer skills. Plan the program in consultation with school leaders and teachers who can help design developmentally and academically appropriate programming.

Think with the principal about ways volunteers-in-residence can share skills such as pottery, carpentry, machine sewing, knitting, or environmental awareness. Maybe your church can help the children undertake a project to help children in another part of the world.

Honor and appreciate public school teachers.

At the beginning of the school year, work with the principal of your partner school to plan a neighborhood tour for the teachers and other staff. Walk together on the tour and share lunch afterwards at your church. Get to know your teachers and help them know you and your community.

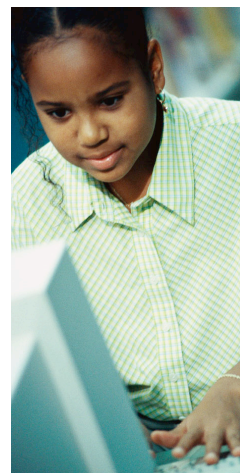
Hold an annual worship service to honor the public school teachers who are members of your congregation or who teach in your neighborhood school. Have a special coffee after worship to thank teachers.



Each semester organize a dinner at your church for members of your congregation to get to know the teachers in your neighborhood school. Or deliver a coffee cake to the staff at your neighborhood school at the beginning of each semester.

Celebrate the students in your congregation who are preparing for careers in public school teaching.

Set a goal of speaking positively about public school teachers on a regular basis. Our culture has developed a disrespect for public school teachers. Make a point of speaking positively about teaching as a career.



Support parents and help them feel welcome at school. Parents are every child's first and most important teachers.

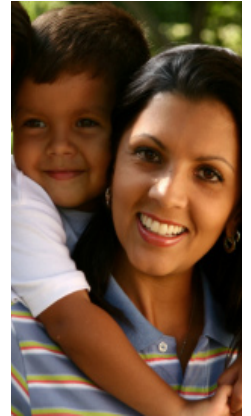
As part of your church programming, make parent classes available. Bring in community resource speakers who can connect parents with the networks they need for support, provide tips about quality childcare programs available in your neighborhood, share information about financial assistance for which parents may qualify to help pay for childcare, and discuss the importance of enriched pre-Kindergarten.

Provide rides for parents who have no transportation to attend PTA meetings at your neighborhood school.



Offer to provide volunteer baby sitting during PTA meetings for parents who have no childcare. Or provide a spaghetti dinner at school for families on PTA night, and then provide childcare including fun activities at the school during the meeting.

Establish a ministry of accompaniment for parents who may feel uncomfortable attending parent meetings or attending parent conferences or curriculum nights. Be there for the parents, just to walk with them.



In collaboration with the principal, find and assign senior citizen mentors for parents who may feel disconnected. *One Church One School*, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Ministry, can guide you as you set up a family mentoring program, <http://www.onechurchoneschool.org/>.

If it is possible and appropriate in your community, make your church available as a site for classes that will help parents with job training or provide instruction in English as a second language.

Partner with your school district as a community institution.

Offer low-rent space to your school district for a special alternative school for students who have been suspended or expelled.

Offer your church as a site for music lessons for children who wouldn't otherwise have this opportunity. Find volunteer teachers or raise funds to pay stipends for graduate students as teachers. Collect instruments and have them repaired. Start small chamber or jazz ensembles and be sure to have the children and their ensembles perform for your congregation. Remember to create a bridge for each child back to the school's music program, because your helping children be better prepared will create opportunities for them in school musical ensembles.

Provide after-school care in your church. Raise funds to hire staff that may include Americorps Volunteers or engage interns from your local college of education (who may be required to do hands-on internship projects where they must work directly with students).

Provide daycare in your church during holidays when parents are at work but the schools are closed. Examples of times when care is needed are winter break, spring break, or during the last few weeks of summer break after most scheduled day camps have closed.

Does your church house a daycare or HeadStart program? If so, connect senior citizens in your congregation with the children in these programs. Volunteers can read to children. Your senior citizens can connect with children through a baking project in your church kitchen. Volunteers can help with crafts that teach real skills... sew on a button or make a puppet. What about planting a senior citizen/HeadStart garden as a year-long project?

Partner with a number of community groups to design and build a state-of-the-art playground for your neighborhood elementary school.

Make your church part of a Community School Collaborative. The Children's Aid Society in New York City—with its National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools (212) 569-2866), and extensive on-line resources, <http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/community-schools/additional-resources-about-community-schools>—offers among the strongest models for full service Community Schools that may include multiple partners and services like health and dental clinics and Head Start programs. These are the lighted school houses, open from early morning into the evening and on weekends. While a congregation rarely serves as the lead partner in a Community School, if your city has a Community Schools partnership, your church can explore joining the coalition under the coordination of the lead agency, which will provide extensive institutional support in terms of fund-raising and service management.



Work with teachers in your community by partnering with the National Education Association Priority Schools Campaign. NEA has launched a major campaign that includes outreach and materials to guide and support congregational-school partnership activities to help transform schools that struggle and are in School Improvement Grant status. Here is how NEA describes its Priority Schools Campaign: “Ours is a transformation that unites all stakeholders—students, administrators, policymakers, parents, communities—in a collaborative mission to fulfill the promise of public education.” Here is a guide for community partners: What Community Members Can Do To Support Priority Schools. <http://neaprioritieschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/what-community-can-do.pdf>.

Advocate for public education justice.

Locally—Keep up with the work of your school board. Get involved as a supportive presence when you can. Support bond issues and school levies as a civic duty and an example to your community—a Christian witness on behalf of the common good and on behalf of children.

At the state level—Write letters to your state legislators and work actively for ample and equitably distributed school funding. You may also want to counter the wave of privatization rolling across the states.

At the federal level—Become an advocate to Congress. Federal policy in public education now affects every public school in the United States through the standardized testing policies and ensuing punishments of the No Child Left Behind Act along with the current Department of Education's Race to the Top competition, School Improvement Grants, and the unilateral NCLB Waivers that come with strings attached in the form of punishments for schools unable quickly to raise scores—including merit pay and reduction of due process for teachers, rating teachers based on students' standardized test scores, school closure and rapid charterization. Today's school reform rhetoric and policies have little to do with the lives of children or the daily work of teachers.



Materials posted on our United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries web pages on justice in public education are kept updated. They will support your advocacy and suggest additional resources from our ecumenical and community partners. <http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education>.