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## A Full-Service School Fulfills Its Promise

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*An elementary school gathers community partners  
to alleviate the effects of poverty.*

Full-service community schools represent a promising education approach that improves learning by addressing students' overall social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs. Ten years ago, Thomas Edison Elementary School in Port Chester, New York, took on the challenge of creating a full-service K–5 community school. By adopting this model, we have been able to raise the quality of teaching and learning in a school with a largely poor, immigrant population—and to improve the lives of students and their families. Our experience has shown us that schools can play a crucial role in helping students and their families overcome the challenges of poverty.

Although Port Chester is surrounded by affluent areas of Westchester County, our community is far from wealthy. More than 80 percent of Thomas Edison's students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and nearly 50 percent are English language learners. The majority of our families are recent immigrants from Hispanic countries.

Although community schools are more typically found in urban settings, the term *urban* has come to be associated with poverty as much as with geographic location.<sup>1</sup> With the influx of immigrants into suburban areas, poverty and its concomitant problems have steadily extended beyond the inner city into suburban areas like Edison's.

Many of Edison's students enter school with problems that affect their readiness to learn. Their families struggle to afford adequate housing, child care, nutrition, and health care. They also face the stresses that accompany immigration: worry about legal status, the difficult process of acculturation, language barriers, frequent moves and disrupted schooling, separation from family members, and school expectations very different from those in their home countries. Edison provides a range of services—including school-based health care, family counseling, parent outreach and education, and after-school enrichments—delivered right at the school.

## Divining Community Concerns

In the late 1990s, teachers and administrators at Edison could see that the struggles of neighborhood families were affecting students' safety and well-being and contributing to low academic achievement. In 1999, only 19 percent of Edison's 4th graders passed New York State's English language arts assessment, and only 75 percent passed the state mathematics assessment.

That year, Edison began the process of becoming a full-service community school. Edison faculty and community stakeholders first sought a deeper understanding of the conditions that were influencing student learning. We conducted focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys in which we asked school practitioners, parents, students, and representatives of community-based organizations what concerns they had about Edison's students' lives and schooling.

Teachers' frustrations included the fact that parents sent children to school sick—expecting the school nurse to provide primary health care—and the difficulty of communication with parents. Parents, in turn, expressed needs for child care, help overcoming language barriers, and guidance on school involvement. Community groups recognized how often emotional and physical stresses were handicapping students.

We drew on these concerns to design a school in which the school district and community-based organizations combined resources to meet students' needs. We created a community-school advisory board that represented key constituents. Manhattanville College volunteered to serve as one of our first partners, fulfilling its own mission of becoming more actively engaged in the community. The Coalition for Community Schools was instrumental in providing a conceptual framework for how community schools can support students' families.

Our advisory board met once a month during our first year, planning and putting in place the community-school framework and developing goals and measurable objectives. We hired a community-school coordinator to help secure funds, coordinate partnership activities, and serve as a liaison between Edison and the partner agencies.

## Partnerships in Action

### Our School-Based Health Center

A review of the school's health records confirmed teachers' observations that many students were coming to school sick. We discovered that fewer than 23 percent of Edison students had health care coverage. The school shared this data with the Open Door Medical Center, an organization providing medical care to poor and underserved families in Port Chester, and initiated a partnership with them. Open Door secured federal grants and other funding to establish a school-based health center.

At the health center, the Edison school nurse and the Open Door nurse practitioner coordinate health care initiatives involving students and their families. The nurse practitioner provides primary care to students at the school. Common colds and other illnesses, which were previously often left untreated, now receive prompt medical attention. This reduces the number of student absences. A weekly visit from Open Door's dentist provides much-needed dental care for Edison's students.

In the past, the only source of relief from a toothache had been a bottle of pain reliever carried in a student's backpack.

All Edison students can receive health care at the center, including screenings, vaccinations, and prescription medication. We refer students needing more complex medical care to Open Door's main medical facility in the community. Open Door staff members provide nutrition and wellness education to parents and help families obtain federally funded medical insurance.

Health-center staff often uncover more serious illnesses, which might also have remained undetected until serious symptoms or complications appeared. For example, while screening a 10-year-old student, school health personnel diagnosed the boy with diabetes. The nurses developed a treatment plan for him that included parent education. This early diagnosis should ensure that this boy receives ongoing monitoring and care so that his illness will not pose barriers to his learning.

As a result of the health center's services, 94 percent of Edison's students are now medically insured and receive ongoing medical and dental care. The success of this model has led the district and Open Door to expand this kind of program to other schools.

## Therapy and Family Casework

To complement the work of teachers and health-center staff in addressing the developmental needs of the whole child, Edison set up a partnership with the Guidance Center, a local mental health facility. A bilingual family caseworker meets with families in distress and helps parents realize their roles as their child's first teachers and primary advocates. The caseworker both helps families in crisis and supports the general parent population at the school, sometimes by facilitating communication between school staff and parents who do not speak English and providing new families with school supplies and clothing, if needed. A social worker provides therapeutic counseling for students in crisis and teams up with the family caseworker to ease the stresses

on students' families. These services help Edison establish links with the families that are hardest to reach.

For example, when a single mother from Mexico recently enrolled her child in Edison, it became clear that this student had special needs and that domestic violence was a problem in this family. The caseworker immediately invited the mother to participate in parenting classes and referred her to a county agency for legal advice and protection, assistance with securing legal residency, and help obtaining a work permit. When her child was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, we provided counseling to both parent and child. In typical schools, families with these kinds of burdens often become invisible. This mother now speaks publicly about domestic abuse and helps other women in similar situations.

## Parent Education and Capacity Building

Edison has hosted a weekly bilingual gathering for parents at the school throughout the past six years, facilitated by the caseworker from the Guidance Center. Parents participate in workshops, seminars, and discussion groups about topics of interest to them. We call this weekly event "*La Segunda Taza de Café*," a Spanish phrase that means "A Second Cup of Coffee." We look on these gatherings as a cordial invitation to parents to come and chat. Discussions have helped parents understand state standards and assessments, exercise their rights and responsibilities in schools, discover strategies to help their children learn, and gather information on citizenship and naturalization. One goal behind this parent program is to develop parents' leadership capacity. Edison's immigrant parents are now visible in the school and active with the Parent Teacher Association.

## After-School Enrichment

Services, Education, and Resources of Westchester, a non-profit organization, was instrumental in creating Edison's after-school

program. This program now serves 130 students daily and meets the twin needs of homework help and child care that parents and teachers identified in our initial community survey. The after-school program offers students martial arts, photography, chess, tennis, computer-assisted instruction, and the opportunity to produce a literary magazine. Through professional and nonprofessional staff members, including many bilingual workers, we both support students' growth in English and offer them enrichment experiences in their native languages. We validate the rich Hispanic heritage of our students by bringing in artists to teach arts and crafts reflecting the culture and styles of indigenous Hispanic people and by inviting them to join a folk dancing troupe that performs frequently.

### Partnership with Manhattanville College

Edison's long-standing professional development relationship with Manhattanville College is an important resource for improving teaching and learning. Edison hires many teachers trained at Manhattanville, which helps us find enough qualified teachers willing and prepared to work in a school confronting the conditions of poverty.

The majority of our new teachers have participated in structured preservice learning experiences through Manhattanville, ranging from facilitating small-group instruction with Edison students to student teaching at Edison. All our new hires participate in a two-year induction program coordinated by the college liaison, with Edison teachers serving as mentors. This formal guidance has increased the school's retention of new teachers; 30 percent of Edison's teachers are Manhattanville alumni. Veteran teachers continue to refine their practice by taking courses in English as a second language, literacy, and content-area instruction at the college for free or at reduced cost.

## Ten Years of Whole Child Education

In June 2007, Edison celebrated its 10-year anniversary as a full-service community school. The changes we made have led to dramatic achievement gains. In 2006, 93 percent of Edison's 4th graders passed the New York State Assessment in English Language Arts, and 89 percent passed in mathematics. We have continued to survey parents, students, and faculty about how well Edison's initiatives are supporting their needs and creating an inclusive culture. Seventy-five percent of our families now participate in schoolwide events. The New York State Education Department has recognized Thomas Edison for its innovative practices and achievement gains.

Through 10 years of growing into a full-service community school, Edison has had some insights. We believe that to successfully create a community school, educators must

- Take a broad view of developmental growth and learning, beyond a narrow focus on test scores.
- Hear the perspectives of all stakeholders—both within and outside the school—about the needs of local children and families. Directly engage all community members in creative problem solving.
- Redefine their mission as ensuring the overall developmental growth of children.
- Realign programs and services to meet the needs of children and families in a comprehensive, integrated manner.
- Combine community and school resources.

A key feature of our design is the fact that community-based partners provide services right on the school site and cultivate inter-agency cooperation. Reshaping ourselves as a community school has enabled our faculty to focus more on teaching and learning, has given families direct access to resources that improve their lives, and has

expanded our partners' ability to reach children and families. We are now educating the whole child at Edison.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Noguera, P. A. (2003). *City schools and the American dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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