

Snapshot #37

Providing Integrated Services in an Inner-City School

The Family Academy
New York, New York

Joan Shaughnessy

Research Findings

In the heart of the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, a small public elementary school named the Family Academy has designed an approach that successfully integrates social services with academic learning. The school raises funds that pay for additional staff and supplemental learning experiences, so that it can address problems that are usually beyond the purview of educators. By creating a community, and then by addressing the basic needs of the families in this community, the school has been able to provide an enriched atmosphere of learning for its students.

The research-supported practices that are exemplified in the Family Academy have been summarized in the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory's *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis/1995 Update* (Cotton 1995). These include:

2.7.3 School Leaders and Staff Collaborate with Community Agencies to Support Families with Urgent Health and/or Social Service Needs.

School leaders and staff:

- a. Learn about the array of medical and social service providers in the community and how to access them.
- d. Assist needy families to access appropriate health and social service facilities and providers in the community.
- e. Identify needy children and families early in the children's school experience and work with community agencies on prevention and intervention activities.

2.8.1 Administrators and Teachers Involve Parents and Community Members in

Supporting the Instructional Program.

Administrators and teachers:

- a. Communicate repeatedly to parents that their involvement can greatly enhance their children's school performance, regardless of their own level of education.
- c. Strongly encourage parents to become involved in activities that support the instructional program.
- d. Provide parents with information and techniques for helping students learn (e.g., training sessions, handbooks, make-and-take workshops, etc.).
- e. Establish and maintain regular, frequent home-school communications. This includes providing parents with information about student progress and calling attention to any areas of difficulty.

2.8.2 Administrators and Teachers Involve Parents and Community Members in School Governance.

Administrators and teachers:

- b. Communicate clearly to parents the procedures for involvement and use the procedures consistently.
- c. Engage parent and community participation on school-based management teams.
- f. Work with cultural minority parents and community members to help children cope with any differences in norms noted between the home and the school.
- g. Involve parents and community members in decision making regarding school governance and school improvement efforts.
- h. Monitor and evaluate parent/community involvement activities and continually work to keep participation effective.
- i. Publish indicators of school quality and provide them to parents and community members periodically to foster communication and stimulate public action.

Context

The Family Academy serves 250 children in grades K-4 in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. It is housed in a three-story concrete slab monolith that has a small, poorly equipped asphalt "yard" encased in a chain link fence. The first two stories of the building contain one of the city's regular schools and a Head Start Program, while the third floor houses the academy.

Enrollment statistics show that the academy's population is comparable to other Harlem neighborhood schools. Eighty-five percent of the families in this school are on some form of public assistance, and more than 40 percent of the academy's families live in public housing units. The majority of the children are members of minority groups; most come from African

American and Latin American cultures.

The founders of the Family Academy chose to serve this population in a unique way. Their dream was to start with a small educational community and to nurture it as it grew. In the academy's first year (1991-92), the school selected just 50 kindergarten children and then continued to add another 50 kindergartners each of the subsequent years. The selection criterion for applicants has been that the families live within walking distance of the school. From that pool of interested families, 50 kindergartners are chosen randomly each year. To prevent the separation of siblings, families with children already enrolled in the school are given first preference when selections are made.

The school receives standard funding from the New York City Board of Education but supplements those dollars with grant money from corporations, individuals or charitable foundations. With these dollars, the academy runs additional programs and has designed a support structure for the entire family unit. Family services are housed under the academy's roof, providing a broad range of assistance for family problems on site. The academy also helps families to access an even broader array of services from local community organizations.

School Philosophy

The Family Academy is dedicated to ensuring that inner city children receive the same opportunity to learn as children in more affluent school settings. To that end, the school creates a stimulating and nurturing environment for its students and extends the school day and year to provide plenty of time for learning. Instead of ending at 3:00 p.m., the Family Academy classes run until 5:00 p.m., adding valuable hours for classroom instruction. The school also continues most of the summer, scheduling only a short vacation period. This means that students' growth and development does not lose ground during summer months. Academy staff also provide enriching experiences in music, drama and physical education during the summer.

School staff operate from several key convictions about the root causes of educational failure in this community. They believe that students' learning falters when they are distracted by health problems, family struggles, isolation, personal anonymity, poor language skills, or other disadvantages. Any or all of these hamper learning and communication. The academy's founders believed that despite these many problems, students can excel academically if a responsive and sustainable support structure makes learning possible. The academy provides organizational mechanisms that address critical family and health issues, while at the same time enabling teachers to focus on classroom instruction. The school emphasizes a challenging, comprehensive curriculum that fosters language skills and critical thinking.

The academy's curriculum and its parent classes are geared to help both adults and children in this community develop their language capacity. Staff recognize that oral communication may initially be difficult and uncomfortable for both the parents and the children, but they also know that with support and encouragement, the parents and their children can improve their communication skills and broaden their horizons via both the written and spoken word. This is reflected throughout the school. For example, the strong schoolwide emphasis on language arts is evident in the library, where books are chosen to promote and respect the students' self-concepts, and also to provide examples of successful conflict resolution.

Effective Structures of the Family Academy

What makes the Family Academy successful? Three unique features stand out: social support structures supplementing the instructional program, support for staff, and the small school size.

Social Support Structures

To ensure that there are enough specialists to supplement the educational mission of the school by serving social needs, a Child and Family Service Center operates at the school. This center includes a family worker, a learning specialist, a child psychologist, and a college intern to work with children when teachers need a break from class.

Having a building-based social worker is a crucial component of this school. Her responsibilities include conducting all family intake interviews and coordinating social services for the families. She knows the problems of all families served by the academy, and she carries a beeper with her at all times so as to be accessible to the families 24 hours a day. She maintains communication with families to minimize situations that could interfere with learning. The problems she addresses include health and housing problems, interpersonal family struggles, and legal issues.

Having specialized help to work with troubled families means that school staff can intensify their focus on the academic work of school. Contacts made by staff of the Child and Family Service Center make it possible for academy staff to learn about family concerns. The extra staff in the center focus on solving children's problems immediately instead of passing these on to another agency.

Other support structures back up the instructional work of the school. For example there are two staff members working on fundraising and public relations with funding agencies. Their success means that students and staff receive additional help from interns, businesses and community volunteers. This outreach increases adult contacts and personalized attention for all students.

Support Provided to Staff

Because the Family Academy is part of the public school system, it recruits its staff from a pool of certificated applicants. Once staff are chosen, academy personnel orient them to the school's unique way of operating. By providing additional support for the staff in the form of professional development, additional volunteers, and college interns in the classroom, the school makes it possible for teachers to focus on student learning and to work more effectively. It is particularly important to value and support the staff in a school like this, because the days here stretch well beyond the 8:00 a.m.-to-3:00 p.m., September-to-June length of the normal school day and school year. Teachers who expect to leave the school building at 3:00 o'clock would find themselves out of sync with the school philosophy. At the same time, there is a recognition that academy staff have full lives beyond their work, and they are asked to share this with the families in the school. Staff share their hobbies, their interests, and their skills, which makes it possible for them to be an integral part of the school's year-round community.

School Size

Another goal is to build the self-esteem of community members, and here, the small, intimate environment of the school plays an important role. Urban anonymity can threaten self-concept, so the school has created a place where all members of the community are known and cared

about. Staff at the school know all children and all parents by their first names and bring personal touches to their interactions with families. Staff greet all members of the family warmly when students are being dropped off or picked up. They invite whole families to get involved in the school and then provide a welcoming atmosphere.

Personal contact turns out to be a great contributor to community development. Parents are more likely to participate in school-related events when they are acquainted with academy staff, and students respond better when school staff have a personal relationship with their whole family. By consciously designing a system that fosters a sense of community ownership, the academy draws more parents into the school. Over time these adults join together through a common commitment to improving student performance.

Because the school started small, it was possible to establish a norm of honest and direct communication. Issues are dealt with directly, and adults and children learn to "be straight" with one another. The longer days mean that staff are not rushed and can take the extra time to foster open communication with and among the students. Staff model conflict resolution in their relationships with each other and with the children. Children are frequently asked to "look me in the eye" when they are talking to an adult and are prevented from retreating into a passive stance by staff's persistent—but caring—probes to learn about students' personal problems. Academy staff have learned that being insistent pays off; problems and incidents that are ignored surface repeatedly until they are addressed. Staff approach these matter-of-factly, bringing their interpersonal skills to their relationships with each other, the children, and their parents, and model a sense of community by revealing their whole person to each other.

A small school is a safer place to share personal interests and passions. The extended day and extended year mean that work at the school is a major part of life; in the intimate environment, staff make their long days meaningful and personally relevant.

Program Features

Family Intake Interviews and Student Assessment

Intake interviews are conducted for all new kindergarten students entering the school. These interviews take from thirty minutes to two hours. During the interview, the social worker completes a family profile, describing the medical history of all family members, housing needs, and child welfare concerns. To promote a sense of trust, parents receive a tour of the file storage area and learn about the security measures used to maintain confidentiality. The academy warns parents that the interview might be uncomfortable, but that the social worker can provide better service if the family situation is explained in full. Parents are asked to sign consent forms that will make it easier for the social worker to serve as an advocate on their behalf.

Coordination of Services

At the Family Academy, the school becomes the introductory point of contact for coordinated or expanded services for families. In the academy's neighborhood, most families receive piecemeal services provided by local walk-up clinics. The typical Harlem clinic is not equipped or funded to address chronic or complicated problems that need long-term solutions, such as in-depth counseling or extended care. Instead, a person needing service typically arrives with a

specific acute problem, and that emergency is dealt with on the spot.

The Family Academy, through its social worker, seeks ongoing services for the whole family. It coordinates management of the family's needs and locates the most comprehensive services available. Because of the social worker's intervention, health services are offered to both adults and children simultaneously in a coordinated fashion. This often means that the family must travel beyond their own neighborhood to a new provider with specialized services. If this is the case, the school makes these arrangements, too. By serving as the coordinator of family cases, the academy enhances communication and ensures that pertinent information will be shared across service providers.

In addition, having an on-site social service team ensures that problems are assessed quickly and solutions are sought. Members of the entire social service team are available to make the family's contact with service providers go smoothly. They may help out by providing a case history to the agency prior to an appointment or by educating the family so parents bring needed materials to an appointment. By ensuring that the family has the necessary paperwork, the precise name for a medical condition, and/or the description of a problem identified during assessment, the experience at the doctor's office becomes less traumatic for the family.

Facilitation of Services

Not only are the services located by school staff, but having extra support staff means that the school can make appointments for services and help family members get to these appointments. The school staff described a recent example: When a student's health problem was noted, and high-quality services were located in a neighborhood a cab ride away from the school, the girl's mother resisted taking the girl to her appointment. So, a school staff member transported the girl to her appointment a few times, each time inviting the mother to go along. At first, the mother was anxious and unwilling to ride along, but after a few doctor visits, she agreed to accompany her daughter to the doctor's office. The staff member was able to talk with the mother, encourage and support her through the unfamiliar and uncomfortable experience of going to the doctor's office. After a few of these accompanied trips, the mother became ready to take the girl herself, without the assistance of the staff member.

Family Academy staff consider helping families to use resources appropriately to be part of their responsibility. Helping a mother gain communication skills so she can work with a health care professional is part of the school's domain. By accompanying the staff member, the mother could observe the staff's relationship with the doctor and slowly learn to trust the system.

Working on these problems takes a lot of commitment and perseverance. In one conversation, a staff member said that many of the schools efforts are fueled by the "f" word; "f" at this school stands for "follow-through." Once they initiate a set of inquiries, staff members do not allow themselves to be discouraged by bureaucracy. They continue to call and to nag until one of two things happen: either they develop a personal relationship with agency social workers and receive personal attention, or they gain a reputation for being "pests." In either case, local agency staff "know we will not go away," and have begun to respond to Family Academy requests.

The Family Academy also uses networking to learn about all available services. One example is the academy's dealings with Child Welfare. Recommendations made by Child Welfare social workers vary; not all arrange for the comprehensive service for families. For example, Child Welfare can provide a homemaker to a family; this person helps with laundry, advises about

nutritional needs, etc., but some welfare workers were not prescribing this service. Once this was recognized, the academy decided to pressure Child Welfare to recommend the most appropriate services for academy families.

Focus on Teaching Social Skills

In addition to academic instruction in the classroom, Family Academy students are specifically taught many interpersonal coping mechanisms, such as using words to express feelings and finding acceptable ways to resolve conflicts. For example, when any kind of argument or controversy breaks out among the students, any adult (administrator, teacher, or college intern) in the vicinity steps in and tells the children that this kind of behavior is not acceptable at school. Adults ask the student to use language to talk about the conflict and/or offer a solution.

Parental Involvement in School Learning

Parental involvement is a crucial aspect of the Family Academy program, and many approaches have been used to encourage their participation in the learning community. Learning opportunities are provided to parents in four ways. First, classes are held to assist parents in curriculum-related topics such as math instruction or language arts. The most popular course offered at the school has been an African American literature course.

Second, materials that can guide parents are made available for parental checkout in the small school library. When parents drop by the library (which is open at the beginning and end of each day), the librarian wheels a cart of parental books out from behind the desk and describes the available books to parents. He collects materials of interest to parents at the local library and keeps them informed about local events. Thirty to forty parents use the library services regularly.

A third way that parents are engaged is through direct one-on-one consultation. Staff meet with parents and hear about the specific concerns or confusion parents are experiencing about ways to support their children's learning. Then staff explain the kind of reinforcement that parents can provide—e.g., phonics practice at home, recognizing letters of the alphabet, or understanding uses of arithmetic when shopping at the store. All of these strategies are explained directly to parents at teachable moments.

A fourth way that parents receive help is during a weekly parent rap group meeting. These informal meetings help parents learn from each other and share their information about successful strategies. Parents express their concerns and problem solve with one another.

Staff believe that the one-on-one consultation and the parent rap group time have proven to be the most successful ways to gain parental support at home. Oral communication in an informal setting seems to provide the best environment for helping parents learn skills that promote student learning.

Parental skills are tapped and their ability to organize and manage social events are encouraged to provide positive and well-rounded community events for the children that support academic instruction.

The school's effort to communicate with parents is noteworthy. The parent newsletter is written in simple sentences—with no jargon or educational "double-speak." The newsletter could be read by a third grader and is laid out in a user-friendly format. Important information is highlighted.

Community Problem Solving

Parents often find that the problems in the wider community influence how they function and the kinds of opportunities that they can provide to their children. For example, the parent rap group determined that it is often unsafe for parents to take their children to the local park on Saturdays because the park is littered with dirty needles, broken glass and used condoms. The parents felt they were often held hostage in their own homes because they could not take their children out for healthy exercise on the weekends. A group of mothers strategized a solution: early on Saturday morning, two of the mothers drop their children off with another family and head over to the park to clean it up. They scour the playground area for a half-hour and remove any dangerous objects. Then the other families in the group bring all the children to the park to play. The mothers have an opportunity to chat with one another and to form the kind of connections needed to sustain a sense of community.

Family Academy In Action

During each quarter of the year, the school holds a festival which supports and promotes a theme that is currently being taught. For example, in the spring of 1995, the entire school focused on multicultural issues. Because the community itself is multicultural, this event was an excellent opportunity for parent involvement. The school council requested that parents help organize and orchestrate many of the activities during this multicultural experience. Each classroom studied one country and prepared an "experience" for the other students in the school to attend.

For their part, parents orchestrated a theme-related Spring Fest in the park. This day included ethnic foods, music and dance from other countries, including a meringue dance group and a Capoeira demonstration (Capoeira is a dance form with African-Brazilian roots that combines sport, dance, traditional instruments, singing and martial arts). Parents made the arrangements for the food, served as the seamstresses for the dancers' costumes, and located a storyteller for the event.

Classroom Experiences

A visit to Angel Gonzalez's classroom reveals what a school day looks like to a first grader. With its cubbies for each student and its class space divided into learning stations, this room seems much like the first grade classrooms in more affluent neighborhoods. The environment is stimulating: art posters, lists of common words on colorful construction paper, and laminated pages from picture books all embellish the room. The first-graders have just completed a unit on architecture and are now using what they have learned to create a model of Old San Juan in Puerto Rico as part of the schoolwide theme of multicultural awareness.

Today the lesson includes a discussion of maps. The students have a chance to look at a floor plan of the Museum of Natural History and a subway map of New York City. The first graders are brimming with observations from their own experience and with questions. The discussion shifts to treasure maps and pirates who marked with an "x" the location of hidden treasure.

Getting Results: Data on Family Academy Success

Collecting data showing that the school makes a difference is an important issue for the

academy, and staff have developed a variety of ways of studying its impact. For example, the school monitors the amount of homework that is done and handed in to the teachers in the school. These data show a steady growth in the amount of work that students do outside of school. In kindergarten 36 percent of the students turn in their homework, and in first grade 65 percent do so. By the second grade, 83 percent of the students are completing and submitting their homework assignments.

School records show that the academy's emphasis on language and literacy is taking hold. Over 95 percent of the families check out books from the school's library. In fact, with only 200 children enrolled in the school, 10,000 books were checked out over the course of the year. This number only includes the books that children check out themselves, not the added books that the librarian circulates to the classroom for teacher use. Not only are books frequently checked out, they are also treated with respect. According to the librarian, there is less vandalism and book damage in this school than in comparable schools in the area.

One of the significant outcomes of increasing parental involvement is improved commitment to getting students to attend school regularly. In the fall of 1994, the Family Academy had the best attendance of any school in district #3—an area that includes all schools in the upper west side of Manhattan. In September, 98 percent of the students attended, and in October the attendance rate was 96 percent. Over the course of the full school year, third grade students averaged only 7.5 days absent.

It is unusual for a school to gather as much data as the Family Academy has, and even more unusual for a school to make specific plans based on analysis of the data. For example, the school staff have learned that the oldest group of students in the building (currently fourth graders) have not shown the language achievement evident in later classes. To address this situation, the school has now implemented a special program with half of the fourth graders to ensure that they are up to grade level in language skills. The school anticipates that additional data will be available in the coming months.