

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Community Schools: A Worthwhile Investment

By Cheryl D. Hayes and Richard R. Buery Jr.

Much of the investment we have made in public school reform over the past decade has failed to pay dividends because it has focused almost exclusively on the classroom-instruction side of the teaching-and-learning equation.

Research has made it clear that instructional improvements can be successful only when they are combined with family and community engagement and genuine efforts to improve the school's climate for learning—in other words, when resources are organized for student success by creating community schools. Now there is **growing proof**, that not only does this reform strategy boost outcomes for children, but that it also provides a significant social return on investment.

The concept of a social return on investment, or SROI, offers a compelling way to measure and communicate the impact of programs that provide social, health, and education services to children and their families. An SROI case study that our organizations released in June examines results from two community schools in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City.


The Children's Aid Society has operated both schools in partnership with New York City's department of education for more than 20 years. Both leverage a wide range of public funding to offer a comprehensive mix of student and family supports and use private funding to fill in gaps and help families in crisis. Both have also been the subject of several third-party evaluations that have shown positive outcomes for their students.


Applying our SROI methodology showed that every dollar invested in programs and supports at the elementary school yielded a \$10.30 return on investment. Dollars at this school were invested in instruction, early-childhood services, parent engagement, after-school and summer enrichment, and medical, dental, and social services.


At the intermediate school level, the return was even greater: \$14.80 for every dollar invested in similar supports.

These results are corroborated by those of a 2012 economic-impact study by EMSI, a leading

economic-modeling firm, which showed that every dollar invested in the network of more than 100 schools operated by the nonprofit organization Communities in Schools generated \$11.60 of economic benefit for the community.

**At least 50 U.S. cities have created systems of community schools**  , serving an estimated 5.1 million students. Community schools expand learning opportunities through after-school and summer-enrichment programs, thereby increasing instructional time and students' academic success. They also provide on-site medical, dental, mental-health, and social services, providing kids ready access to much-needed care and removing health-related barriers to learning and development.

The results are powerful. In Cincinnati, where every school is a community school, the public school graduation rate has climbed from 51 percent to more than 80 percent. And the achievement gap between African-American and white students has been **nearly eliminated**  . In Portland, Ore., regular participants in community school services showed strong gains in academics, attendance, and behavior.

Community schools also give parents opportunities to engage in the life of the school and improve their own skills; after all, we know that engaged parents raise better-educated children. **In a study of community schools in San Mateo County, Calif.**  , 93 percent of parents attended parent-teacher conferences, 95 percent encouraged their children to complete their homework, and 97 percent talked to their children about school.

Over the past decade, community schools in New York City and across the country have been shown to improve academic achievement, increase parent engagement, boost student and teacher attendance, and increase graduation rates. These gains are particularly critical in poor and severely disadvantaged neighborhoods, where the academic-achievement gap is more pronounced than it has been in decades.

Now, with strong evidence that community schools also produce results with significant monetary value to students, their families, and the school community, we have the economic argument for this strategy. Using the SROI methodology, we can show that community schools avoid the costs of bad outcomes, such as students' repeating a grade and overuse of emergency rooms for routine medical care. We can also document the social and economic value of positive outcomes, such as children reading at grade level and high school graduation. For policymakers worried about the modest incremental costs of creating and sustaining community schools, these results make a persuasive financial case for investment that public officials and taxpayers can easily understand.

Our case study of the social return on investment of community schools tells a clear and compelling story: When we apply the best available knowledge about children's learning and healthy development and bring together the best resources of schools and communities, we can achieve a solid return on investment.

Education reform clearly needs a new direction. In an era of tight budgets and growing public skepticism, community schools are an investment lead worth

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*Cheryl D. Hayes is the president of the Finance Project, an independent nonprofit research organization based in Washington. Richard R. Buery Jr. is the president and chief executive officer of the Children's Aid Society in New York City.*

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