

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Howard County Public School System Ellicott City, Maryland

In the Fall of 1996, the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) established two Community Based Learning Centers in Community Homes, a neighborhood of low to moderate income housing in Columbia, Maryland. Goal I of our school system states that the system is committed to ensuring that every student meets or exceeds rigorous performance standards and that the system's achievement data will be free of patterns associated with gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The Learning Centers were established to support families whose children often lack equal access to the necessary resources needed for learning. Over time, these challenges often become impediments to learning which trap children in a vicious cycle of academic failure. Community Based Learning Centers disrupt this cycle by functioning as neighborhood academic support sites for students in the hours immediately following school. The Centers provide a bridge between home and school and address many of the problems listed above by providing:

- homework assistance
- tutoring in specific areas
- assistance with book reports, projects, and other long-term assignments
- learning games
- field trips and community service experiences
- peer mediation and conflict resolution
- opportunities for family and community involvement

Today, there are three Learning Centers funded by the Howard County Public School System, serving an average of 75 students per day. There are four elementary schools and one middle school, and approximately 55 teachers, 55 families, and 10 employees of Columbia Housing Corporation involved. The student population is very diverse with representation from more than 11 ethnic groups. Twenty percent of the students come from homes where English is not the primary language, and 12% come from homes where English is not spoken at all. Eighty percent of the participants are African-American. Over 90% of the participants have been enrolled in the Centers since their inception.

Community Homes was chosen initially because it was a community where I had developed trusting relationships with the families, and the management company, the school system's Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP), wanted to develop an afterschool program there, and Columbia Housing Corporation was more than willing to collaborate with us. It was easy to ask key residents to deliver a survey to families to see if they would support the learning center concept. The response was 100% favorable. What makes our centers successful is the well-defined collaboration among the partners. The school system oversees all aspects

of the learning center programs through the daily presence in the Centers of Lynne Newsome, the BSAP elementary facilitator and myself, the Family and Community Outreach Liaison. Together we serve as resources of support for the families, school, and the community. We are available to accompany parents to school conferences and special education hearings, as well as to coordinate family nights, supervise the Centers, hire and train staff, interface with home schools, manage the day-to-day operations of the Centers, and articulate with the students' teachers formally and informally.

Columbia Housing Corporation provides and maintains two of the sites (one in the rental office and the other in the community room), and assists with communications, recruitment of volunteers, funding, and snacks. The third center site (a neighborhood center) was provided through a collaboration with the Harper's Choice Village Board and the Columbia Association.

Currently we have a staff of six. Some of them are parents and grandparents of elementary students. One of them is a retired teacher. All of them are employed in other jobs. These persons are seen as caring, significant others by the children who know most of them as members of their community. Staff members are trained for a week at the beginning of the school year, and then ongoing training and awareness is provided at the monthly staff meetings held on Fridays. Each Learning Center is staffed with a site coordinator (community member) and an assistant site coordinator. They are responsible for opening and closing the centers, preparing snacks, maintaining files, and helping the students. We divide the time into sessions—winter and spring sessions or fall, winter, and spring. It has been our experience that creating sessions rather than having continuous attendance from September through June fosters more successful participation.

The Centers are open 4 days a week from 3:30pm-5:00pm and target children in grades 1-6. Each session begins with a snack and the rap "Knowledge is Power". Data on file from teachers suggest areas of concentration needed for each student. One of our successful strategies is our no-mail policy. All information is delivered personally by the staff, printed on flyers and carried home by the children, or put in a newsletter.

Annual operating costs average \$1000 for the site coordinator, \$600 for the assistant site coordinator, \$500 for snacks, and \$1000-1500 for reading books, calculators, dictionaries, project supplies, etc. When possible, we try to make sure each participant has the necessary basic learning resources in the home, i.e., a dictionary. The cost for students is \$10/year or an equivalent amount in snack foods. Sometimes parents make additional donations of paper goods when they are able. The program is not all work. At least two field trips, funded by community groups, are scheduled throughout the year. In our first two years, we were funded by a \$25,000/year crime prevention grant. It has become clear that the continued existence and development of Community Based Learning Centers should not be solely dependent on funding sources external to the public school system. A

request for funds has been included in the FY00 budget to maintain the current Centers and develop two more Centers in Howard County.

The Learning Centers have become trusted and caring centers of learning in the children's neighborhoods. This has been demonstrated through the consistent and effective academic assistance given by the staff and volunteers. Most students complete all of their homework before leaving. From the beginning, it has been the enthusiasm of the students that has influenced their families the most. The best way to have a positive relationship with parents is to have a positive relationship with their children. Even with non-English speaking families there is a level of trust and support because the children are happy with the quality of their homework completion. Parents and teachers give positive written and verbal feedback concerning the quantity and quality of the students' work. The centers have been used as a practicum site for mediated learning and the CPD parent involvement course. Administrators, parents, and teachers are referring others to the Centers. In addition, other schools and communities are requesting assistance in starting Community Based Learning Centers.

Because of the enthusiasm of the children, a six-week summer learning camp was created in 1998. It is an all-day program with a focus on academic acceleration in the morning and extracurricular activities in the afternoon. A second grader called me at home (we publish our numbers in the parent newsletter) during the summer learning camp to say he would be absent the next day. Because it was library day, he wanted someone to get new library books for him. The beginning of the 1998 school year, a parent called my office to ask when the Learning Centers were opening. Another called for assistance with school supplies.

Since the first year, an annual awards banquet had been held. This event started out as a closing celebration for the Learning Center participants and their families. It now includes recognition for all graduating seniors in the Community Homes and the awarding of two scholarships. Parents and other family members, community supporters, school system representatives, politicians, and employees of the Housing Corporation fill the tables decorated by the children. This affair is a wonderful example of the collaboration of home, school, and community for student success.

In order to educate our children we must realize that our responsibility cannot end when the students leave school grounds. For increasing numbers of students, we must bring "school" to their home communities by increasing self-efficacy and empowering community residents to become actively involved in the education of their community's children.

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