



COMMUNITY SCHOOL PROFILE

SYCAMORE COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT

ABOUT THE DISTRICT

Located in northeastern Illinois, the Sycamore Community Unit School District (CUSD) serves almost 3,800 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Sycamore CUSD is made up of seven schools: Sycamore High School, Sycamore Middle School, North Elementary, North Grove Elementary, South Prairie Elementary, Southeast Elementary, and West Elementary.



DISTRICT-WIDE COMMUNITY SCHOOLING

Led by Tony Stahl, Director of Community Schools, Sycamore's community school initiative has been many years in the making. Initially, the district placed an emphasis on providing quality out-of-school time services for students, including childcare for younger students and whole-child enrichment opportunities. The district's community school initiative began when there arose increasing concern that students' and families' needs were not being met, despite the services the district was providing. The community school model offered the means for the district to grow and refine the work they had already started, providing an infrastructure for conducting more formal needs assessments, improving the quality and intentionality of services, and developing meaningful partnerships. The initiative has been in place for approximately eight years and is continually informed by the community school model, namely the community school pillars.

Highlights of community school work

- District-wide community schooling
- Coordinating services to support mental health: Sycamore CUSD's YESS Program
- Academic support and lifetime experiences: Sycamore CUSD's afterschool and summer programming
- Tackling a community issue: Sycamore CUSD, Kishwaukee Community Hospital, and the CATCH program team up to address obesity
- Developing a network of partnerships: West Elementary's approach to meeting the needs of students and families

Director of Community Schools:

Tony Stahl

Superintendent:

Kathy Countryman

Partnerships: include, but are not limited to, Kishwaukee Family YMCA; Kishwaukee Community Hospital; Ideal Industries; Northern Illinois Food Bank; Ben Gordon Center; Family Service Agency; Dekalb County Youth Service Bureau; Northern Illinois University; and the University of Illinois Extension.

COORDINATING SERVICES TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH: SYCAMORE CUSD'S YESS PROGRAM

Two years ago, Sycamore CUSD began implementing Joliet's YESS (Youth Experiencing Success in School) Program as a model for integrating school-based mental health support services for students. Led by Mary Gentile, School Social Worker at Sycamore Middle School, the model has now been implemented throughout the district after a year of thoughtful planning and partnership development. Through the YESS Program, students are eligible to receive school-based counseling from three local mental health agencies: Ben Gordon Center, DeKalb County Youth Service Bureau, and Family Service Agency. For students, the accessible mental health services offered through the YESS Program have provided a school-based continuity of care. The YESS Program has also strengthened the agencies' roles in their communities; when necessary, some of the providers have extended their work within schools to identify additional community-based services and supports for students' families.

"Partnerships need to meet the enlightened self-interest of both parties...you need to be aware of that and search for that."

- Tony Stahl, Director of Community Schools, on the importance of identifying and fostering mutually beneficial partnerships.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND LIFETIME EXPERIENCES: SYCAMORE CUSD'S SUMMER AND AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMMING

In addition to the schools' sports teams, performing arts groups, and various clubs, Sycamore CUSD offers extended learning and enrichment opportunities through before-school, afterschool, and summer programs at each of its seven schools. Each program is designed specifically for its school and student body. The district-led OSCAR



program, for instance, provides structured and enriching child care for students attending the district's five elementary schools.

Spartan REACH, Sycamore Middle School's afterschool and summer program, has been tailored to meet the diverse strengths and needs of the school's students. The Afterschool Advisory Committee, led by Stahl and composed of ten parents, community members, and students, helps guide afterschool and summer planning. Two of the program's primary goals are to provide targeted academic support and exposure to real world experiences through field trips, hands-on activities, and interaction with community members. Spartan REACH's academic focus includes homework support, learning enrichment activities, and a special emphasis on strengthening students' reading skills. For Spartan REACH Summer Camp, students are referred into one of two courses: Reading Improvement or Life Skills, which focuses on students' broader social and academic needs. Students volunteer in the community, explore possible careers through hands-on learning experiences, and select "lifetime leisure" activities that grant them exposure to new hobbies and activities such as fishing, hiking, and canoeing. Students also participate in an afterschool cooking class facilitated by the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension. In May of 2013, Spartan REACH students planned, shopped for, prepared, and served a community dinner at the DeKalb County Farm Bureau.

TACKLING A COMMUNITY ISSUE: SYCAMORE CUSD, KISHWAUKEE COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, AND THE CATCH PROGRAM TEAM UP TO ADDRESS OBESITY

Two years ago, Kishwaukee Community Hospital conducted a community-wide health assessment that revealed a disconcerting obesity rate within the county. In order to address this issue, the Hospital teamed up with Sycamore CUSD to develop strategies to reinforce healthy living habits amongst students and their families. In response, the CATCH (Coordinated Approach To Children's Health) program, which promotes healthy nutrition and exercise through hands-on activities, has been implemented as an afterschool and summer program in all five of Sycamore's elementary schools. Implementing CATCH has required strong partnerships between each school, Kishwaukee Community Hospital, and the Kishwaukee Family YMCA. Led by a school-based Site Director, afterschool lessons are co-facilitated by OSCAR and YMCA staff members. CATCH allows students the opportunity to participate in lessons on nutrition and healthy habits; sports such as golf, track, and basketball; weekly trips to the YMCA for swimming; and field trips to community locations including the grocery store. The focus on healthy lifestyles is continued during the summer, when the Sycamore Park District provides facilities and equipment for students to participate in additional lessons, daily swimming, and team sports. Calling upon district-wide and school-level support, ongoing and interactive community partnerships, strong family involvement, and data-driven decision making using pre- and post-data to refine and expand the program, CATCH is a working example of how Sycamore CUSD has utilized important community school principles to tackle a complex issue.



DEVELOPING A NETWORK OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: WEST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL'S APPROACH TO MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

The administration and staff at West Elementary School have established a number of ongoing partnerships in order to provide necessary resources and services for its students and families. Through the school's partnership with The Northern Illinois Food Bank, approximately twenty families receive a weekly home delivery of food essentials. The school also collaborates with the nearby Northern Illinois University by providing a training ground for the University's teacher candidates; in return, the University shares access to research and resources relevant to the school. In addition to its participation in the YESS Program, the Family Service Agency oversees Big Brothers Big Sisters, a program that pairs over twenty West students with local high school mentors. Last year, West Elementary partnered with North Grove Elementary and Youth Service Bureau, another YESS Program agency, to develop an anti-bullying project that involved a school-wide survey and staff presentation on bullying issues. Several students have also received free services from a local optometrist and dentist.

"We're all in this together. The community knows that we need them. This school—it's theirs. The school belongs to the community."

-Brad Barnhardt, 2012-2013 West Elementary School Principal, on the close ties between West Elementary and its surrounding community.

In addition to its ongoing partnerships, West Elementary has piloted a study with the YMCA to gather data on the impacts regular physical activity can have on a student's academic performance and social-emotional wellbeing. As part of the study, selected West students and their families will receive free year-long family memberships to the YMCA, where they will have access to a fitness center and swimming pool. Student data will be collected three times over the course of the year. West Elementary and the YMCA will work together to gather the data, interpret the findings, and decide what the outcomes of the study mean for how their partnership should be structured in order to provide the most beneficial information and services for students and families in the future.



KEY LESSONS

- Intentional planning using the community school model can help in growing, evaluating, and refining your work. The Community School Parthenon—distinguished by four pillars of Academics, Health, Families, and Community and their associated building blocks—can serve as an infrastructure for implementing new services and resources. **The Federation's website offers a number of tools for both developing and established community school initiatives.**
- Other districts and schools may offer successful strategies that are tailorable to the unique characteristics of other students and communities. **Networking between districts can open up access to useful tools and resources that will enable community school professionals to avoid "recreating the wheel" in their efforts to support students and their families.**
- Bringing together multiple community partners and resources, community schools can serve as powerful agents in addressing complex community challenges. **Community partnerships not only serve as a source of services for students and families, but can also work to inform the priorities of your community school work through the sharing of access to important community information. The community school advisory board structure can provide a framework for forming and facilitating these relationships and implementing strategies based on community input.**

The Federation for Community Schools would like to thank:

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**During 2012-2013 school year*

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