

THE LAWRENCE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS CASE STUDY

At their best, Gateway Cities like Lawrence launch young residents out into the world and securely up into the middle class. But acting as a springboard for intergenerational economic mobility is getting more difficult, as Robert Putnam portrays in his most recent book, *Our Kids*. Children living in urban communities no longer get the full array of experiences they need to grow into successful adults. In large part this is because so many families are low-income and led by a single parent working long hours. This makes it difficult for them to engage with schools and establish relationships with other families in the neighborhood. Without the social capital that develops from these interactions, families are less stable and communities less cohesive.¹

Lawrence is certainly not unique in experiencing these challenges, but the collaborative spirit and bold ambition with which city leaders have joined together to support children and families is tells an exceptional story. A receiver appointed by the state to take over the city's struggling school system is working alongside a new mayor and the heads of strong civic organizations. Together, the schools, the mayor, and local nonprofits are weaving a web of partnerships to give students and families a diverse array of opportunities to engage in the community and draw sustenance from it.

THE PROBLEM: **A matter of time**

If you had only one word to describe the challenge Gateway Cities like Lawrence face, the word to choose would be *time*. As the Massachusetts-based nonprofit the National Center on Time & Learning has compellingly demonstrated, high-poverty schools cannot provide all of the experiences that disadvantaged students need to thrive in our complex society within the constraints of the traditional six-and-a-half-hour-day, 180-day-school-year schedule.² While communities like

Lawrence strive to offer organized sports, dance, drama, and other quality enrichment programs outside of school, making it to these activities is challenging for youth who lack transportation, often have childcare obligations for younger siblings, and a whole variety of other barriers to participation. The reality is very few youth in low-income communities get enough exposure to life experiences that help them build relationships with adults, learn to work as a team, develop a better understanding of their talents, and discover opportunities available to them in the wider world.

Parents also lack time. They work long, hard hours, often at multiple jobs. Language and cultural barriers make it more difficult for them to get the most out of the limited time they do have to engage with their child's school. Without the ability to participate fully in school-centered activities, they have difficulty forming relationships with other parents, making it harder to exchange knowledge about struggles a child may be having, gather information about job opportunities for themselves or a family member, and support in time of crisis. This has implications beyond individual students and families. If schools aren't weaving this social fabric, it's much harder for neighborhoods and the city itself to function as a successful community.³

THE OPPORTUNITY: **A collaborative state receiver; an exceptionally strong network of civic organizations; a new mayor**

In response to the chronically low performance of the Lawrence Public Schools, the state put the district in receivership, placing Jeff Riley at the helm in 2012. The new superintendent was an outsider from Boston best known for converting one of BPS's worst performing middle schools into one of its best. Among his key reforms, Superintendent Riley extended



A Community Education Circle coming together

the school day, partnering with a number of high capacity nonprofits to provide fun and challenging activities. While many leaders dropped into a failing school system would look inward, focusing on academics to drive up test scores, Superintendent Riley knew the power of strong partners, appreciated that schools need to educate the whole child, and had faith that investing in community partnerships would pay off over time.

Superintendent Riley landed in the perfect place. For a city of its size, Lawrence was awash with nonprofit capacity in education, youth development, and community organizing. The Community Group (TCG) has been a nationally-recognized leader in the field of early childhood development since the 1970s. In the 1990s, TCG became one of the early leaders in the charter movement, launching a successful K-8 school with a long history of exchanging ideas and practice with public school educators. Thanks in part to the generosity of families who got a strong start in Lawrence, the city also has a state-of-the-art Boys and Girls Club and a healthy YMCA. While most cities of Lawrence's size have limited nonprofit community development capacity, Lawrence has two prominent organizations: Lawrence Community Works (LCW), a community development corporation that has drawn national attention for its resident engagement, empowerment, and asset building model, and Groundwork Lawrence, a nonprofit working to bring physical and environmental renewal to the city through a federally-funded national network.

In November 2013, one year after Superintendent Riley's arrival, residents elected Mayor Daniel Rivera, a progressive leader, to a four-year term. The new administration brought energy and optimism to civic leaders fighting for Lawrence families.

THE STRATEGY: A (two-dimensional) school-community partnership

Superintendent Riley's plan was to partner with community organizations to increase the school district's capacity to deliver enrichment activities. Superintendent Riley explains the imperative: "You see super high performing schools [in high poverty areas], where the students even beat Weston kids on the MCAS, but all of the Weston kids get through college." He explains that Lawrence kids need more opportunities to get up on stage and perform in front of a large audience. Enrichment opportunities like these give kids the life skills they need to thrive.

The partners were on board with Superintendent Riley's vision and positioned themselves to help him achieve it. As they worked together and developed trust in Superintendent Riley and his team, the community organizations added another fold to the strategy. Because the schools reach more residents than any other institutions in the community (perhaps half of all Lawrencians, between students and their families), they are well-positioned to serve as a nexus for community economic

"Students needed to show themselves and others that they were gaining competencies."

development efforts. As Jess Andors, the Executive Director of Lawrence Community Works, describes the thinking: "We wanted to see if the nonprofit and business communities could complement the school turnaround effort by connecting with and organizing parents, increasing their attachment to the schools and linking them to training and employment opportunities that help them become more secure and stable economically. If we were able to recreate the schools not only as a hub for academic excellence, but also for family access to education and opportunity, that would have an amazing impact on poverty and the city."

At a minimum, the community groups could use their organizing prowess to help with the difficult work of engaging parents in the schools. But they could also reach more parents and more effectively connect them to services with the potential to improve family finances. Over time, if these efforts result in more economic stability for students, all the better from the educator's perspective.

THE IMPLEMENTATION: High speed weavers

Superintendent Riley took over the Lawrence Public Schools in January 2012. Right away he started planning ways to give students more enrichment programming. His turnaround strategy, issued in May 2012, asked schools to extend learning time, specifically calling on schools to reach into the community.

Empowering school leaders to develop productive relationships with the community was central to his approach. When he was a principal in Boston, Superintendent Riley fought for autonomy to make decisions that were best for his school. Now as the state-appointed receiver for a district of 28 schools, he offered greater latitude to principals. He asked them, along with their faculty, to figure out how to use expanded learning time to serve their students.

To help school leaders create plans to use this additional time well, he brought in the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL). With funding from the Ford Foundation, NCTL provided deep technical assistance, partnering with school leaders and teacher teams to redesign their school day with a focus on strengthening instruction and building strong professional learning communities. For example, they helped school leaders survey students to better understand what kinds of enrichment opportunities kids were looking to explore. They also surveyed teachers to build an inventory of in-house skills. This gave principals a better understanding of what

they could provide, what kind of instruction they should pull into the schools with help from the community, and what activities they might access off campus.

With coaching from NCTL, they were encouraged to look for experiences that enabled kids to develop mastery. Having fun would not be enough; students needed to show themselves and others that they were gaining competencies, whether it was learning how to cook healthy foods or how to swim.

With a better grasp of what schools were looking to find, Superintendent Riley put together a "speed dating" event. School principals and local nonprofits leaders spent an evening rotating around the room for multiple five-minute one-to-one conversations. This helped school leaders develop a sense of what community organizations might offer. Equally important, it sent a strong signal to the community organizations about the school leadership's commitment to collaboration. Superintendent Riley explains that when he took over the schools a few of the partners reached out and "they were shocked to hear back from me because that is not how the district had typically operated." Shelia Balboni, the long-time leader of The Community Group, is animated when asked about the new collaborative spirit: "Before Superintendent Riley, we were in some schools, but I had to fight so hard to be there, even though it was in the best interest of the children."

Superintendent Riley began to hold regular meetings with the city's nonprofit leaders. Heather McMann, Executive Director of Groundwork Lawrence, explains: "I don't have time to spare for meetings that aren't going to lead to something. But I had a sense that this might be different. I didn't know exactly where Superintendent Riley was going, but I knew I needed to be at the table."

Soon principals and community organizations were having many productive conversations. The school leaders discovered that Lawrence had significantly underused capacity for high-quality learning opportunities for kids outside of the school setting.

One principal, who saw perhaps a third of her students head to after-school programs at the Boys and Girls Club, made a call to Kerry Wiersma, the Grants Development Manager at the Boys and Girls Club, to follow up on a conversation that began at the event. She was wondering if all of her students might be able to go to the Boys and Girls Club during school hours for enrichment. The Boys and Girls Club's state-of-the-art facility was mostly empty during the school day. Not only did

"Lawrence leaders came to consensus that supporting the school turnaround was the priority for the community."

it have a great aquatics program, the club also had an expansive list of enrichment programs, including a high-quality healthy living curriculum designed with a grant from the New Balance Foundation and an excellent computer-based Maker Education program, equipped with modern technology and funding from Intel.

The more principals talked with community leaders, the more quality enrichment opportunities they uncovered. A large national foundation had supported the Lawrence YMCA's collaboration with a local professor to develop curriculum that involves measuring steps and heartrate during active play, and using MCAS-tested math skills to analyze the data generated. Groundwork Lawrence had an environmental education curriculum to help kids understand and enjoy the Lawrence ecosystem. The Community Group had an established mock trial program for fourth graders.

To connect schools to these enrichment opportunities, the central office issued an RFP. It then vetted responses and put together lists of vendors that the schools could engage as community partners. The central office handled the contracting and assisted schools as they developed MOUs with external organizations.

By the time kids returned to school in September 2013, plans had been laid. A number of schools would be loading all of their students on buses once a week to spend the better part of a day at the Boys and Girls Club or YMCA. Notable among them was the new Oliver Partnership School, itself the product of another burgeoning district partnership with the Lawrence Teachers Union and its parent organization on the state and national level, the American Federation of Teachers. Managed by the union in collaboration with the district, OPS's model emphasizes seeking the support of local agencies and community groups, and a weekly trip to the YMCA for the entire student body has remained an integral part of the school curriculum since it opened its doors that fall. Other schools would be working with The Community Group, who relied on their staff and decades of relationships in the city to provide array of enrichment activities.

WHILE ALL OF THIS ACTIVITY was going on with a focus on extending the school day and providing Lawrence youth with more enrichment, nonprofit leaders were sitting around

another table talking about how the city could compete in the Working Cities Challenge, an initiative led by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston to help community leaders develop collaborative relationships to tackle hard problems. The rules of the competition gave cities wide latitude to choose a problem to address. But each community could submit only one application, and they would be judged heavily on the degree to which all sectors (public, private, and nonprofit) were active participants in the project.

At first there were many ideas, but slowly Lawrence's leaders came to a consensus that supporting the receiver and the school turnaround effort was the priority for the community. As Jess Andors of Lawrence Community Works explains, "It became really clear that the school turnaround is *the* transformational systems-changing opportunity in the city right now."

The leaders fashioned a bold idea plan to support the school turnaround and took the \$700,000 first place prize in the Working Cities competition in January 2014. Over three years, these funds would support the implementation of the Lawrence Working Families Initiative. Led by Lawrence Community Works and the Lawrence Public Schools, the initiative involves 37 partners (and growing), including Northern Essex Community College, the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, the Valley Works Career Center, the Mayor's Health Task Force, Lawrence General Hospital, and nearly 20 major employers in the region.

With funding from the Working Cities Challenge, the initiative hired a director and a full-time family coach for the Lawrence Public Schools Family Resource Center. They began with outreach to both parents and employers.

LCW had already begun developing a parent engagement strategy through a design team process, the organization's signature model for building trust and exploring new approaches to solve hard problems. For the design team, LCW assembled a small group of parents, teachers, and students to think about how you build capacity to engage parents in a school system that traditionally lacked effective practices to support communication between families and schools. The design team devised a solution they called Community Education Circles.

Parents, teachers, and students from a school would come together for a series of three to four weekly discussions held

over dinner at either their school, LCW, or the home of a parent or teacher. These conversations would give members of the circle a chance to build relationships and mutual understanding. Each circle would work to create a strategy or project that they could implement to make their school community stronger.

To engage employers in the schools and increase their contact with a pipeline of parents looking for better employment opportunities, partners in the Lawrence Working Families Initiative along with the mayor's office and the city's business development director started to conduct outreach to employers jointly. Together, they visit companies to better understand their needs and to figure out if there might be a mutual benefit in partnering with the school district, for example, in offering workshops or sending employees to fill volunteer opportunities. According to Jess Andors, the message they seek to convey during these visits is less "Here are ways you can help us" and more "What can we do to help you?"

The Lawrence Working Families Initiative provides employers with prospective workers who have been pre-screened, and offers English language classes, connections to (and scholarships for) sectoral and soft skills training, and complementary resources, such as financial coaching for parents.

Recognizing that these employment opportunities may not be sufficient, the initiative is also supporting families who are interested in self-employment, such as operating as a home daycare center, by drawing on the expertise of partners. (The Community Group has a long history of training home daycare providers.) With tighter integration to the schools, there is hope that as parents gain experience in early education, they can move up the career ladder and into public school teaching, helping the schools expand its workforce of diverse, highly-qualified educators.

THE RESULTS: A web of school-community partnerships

The Lawrence Boy and Girls Club's state-of-the-art facility just a few years ago sat dark during school hours, but now it is buzzing with activity all day. Each week, six schools take turns bussing students over to the club during the school day. Students pick two one-hour classes to take during their weekly visit. Options include art, basketball, cooking and nutrition, computers, creative writing, dance, karate, music, and swimming. By the end of the year, each student completes six enrichment courses.

The YMCA in Lawrence set up something similar, with kids getting bussed in from another set of schools. The Y also sends its staff into the schools to deliver enrichment on-site to reach even more students than its facilities can accommodate. Frank Kennelly at the YMCA explains that they used to serve 140 kids

after school; now they are reaching thousands of Lawrence kids, both at the Y and in the schools.

Groundwork Lawrence has also expanded its scope. While the nonprofit had maintained an environmental educator on staff, it never had resources to bring its programming to scale. Now Groundwork Lawrence sends its staff into the schools, getting students outside to collect bugs, identify plants and animals, do gardening, and build campfires and shelters. Thousands of kids get new learning experiences every year.

The expanded day with integrated enrichment programs may be particularly beneficial for kids who learn differently and excel in settings different from the traditional classroom. The partnerships may be increasing the capacity of the schools to offer differentiated learning. For example, Heather McMann of Groundwork Lawrence explains how her curriculum is excellent for kids with special needs. Outdoor education involves a lot of tactile and sensory experiences that can be adapted for and enjoyed by kids with sensory processing challenges. Groundwork Lawrence has paid particular attention to these learners in developing its curriculum and they have trained their staff to work with students who have special needs.

The partnerships may also work in reverse, helping to build this capacity in the community. For instance, the Boys and Girls Club's after-school programs had not been set up to serve students with special needs. Youth participating in their programs were fairly independent, selecting their own activities and playing in large, busy game rooms during free time. With schools coming in during the day for enrichment, the Club has to serve all students. Each school brings along its special education team. These specialists have helped Club staff learn to work with kids who need more support. This partnership makes it possible for students who can benefit from active learning to participate. Kerry Wiersma describes how one principal visiting the Club during the school-day enrichment program commented that she saw one of her students, who has special needs and faces a lot of challenges at school, smiling for the first time.

The rapid progress the Lawrence Public Schools are making as a district suggests these partnerships are contributing to the success of students more broadly. Education Resource Strategies (ERS) published a report earlier this year which found that students are getting 130 more hours per year of core academic instruction. The rest of the time is spent on enrichment and targeted work with individual students. By having partners come in to provide the enrichment, teachers have gained time for collaborative planning. ERS found that Lawrence teachers now report spending two hours planning collaboratively every week, compared to the state average of 1.25 hours.⁴

Heather McMann at Groundwork Lawrence says she has never seen partnerships like this before in the city: "There have

"Other indicators are needed to gauge how the enrichment experiences contribute to the social-emotional development of students."

always been so many talented and dedicated community leaders running programs to benefit Lawrence kids and their families. Now they are working and innovating together with school administrators, on a large scale, to help the kids and community thrive."

Lawrence's community partnerships have even caught the attention of the *New York Times*, whose editorial board praised the system for rooting out dysfunction not by turning away from the community, but through deep engagement and partnership.⁵ Jess Andors from Lawrence Community Works describes how this change is visible to parents. She notes that in the past many schools "were fortresses with security guards and parents did not feel welcome." In contrast, the school system now has a bright and welcoming Family Resource Center, where parents find an outstretched hand. The Community Education Circles have also shown promising results. While a rigorous evaluation is under way, more than 300 parents have participated in the circles to date and, as just one of many teachers have noted, "Those parents that participated seem to be much more comfortable in the school and engaging with me in communication like notes, emails, and conversations. It makes a difference that I now know so many of the parents by first name." Several Circle parents are now being recruited by LCW and LPS together for Design Teams to create sustained and customized structures for parent engagement in individual schools.

THE ROAD AHEAD: Transitioning to a sustainable model

In June, the state extended the receivership, keeping the system under Superintendent Riley's control through at least 2018. This stability will help the school district and community institutionalize its collaborative partnership model.

The trust and relationships that have been built will be critical over the next few years as the team collaborates to create a sustainable financial model. Efforts in Lawrence have been supported with seed funding provided by the Working Cities Challenge, the Kellogg Foundation, and others. While the plan is to replace these grant dollars with local funds once the partners prove these concepts work, this may be challenging.

For the school district, collecting data on social-emotional assessment will be particularly helpful for balancing future

investment decisions. Test scores are an indirect indicator that the partnerships are successful, but other indicators are needed to better gauge how student enrichment experiences contribute to social-emotional development. This will require a new set of assessments that the district is currently exploring.

Similarly, leaders of the Working Families Initiative are eager to see findings from the evaluation of the Community Education Circles. They hope this information will give them a blueprint for expanding the circles, making them an integral component of each school's parent engagement strategy and a key pathway for connecting parents to the Family Resource Center and economic opportunity in Greater Lawrence.

For the community partners, transitioning to a sustainable model also presents challenges. With contracts redrawn every year, they face a lot of uncertainty. Often they have very little time to plan. These organizations have expanded their staffing considerably to serve Lawrence students. This adjustment requires more management capacity, but program budgets have generally covered only frontline staffing. They must also fundraise to cover equipment costs and upkeep with the wear and tear on their facilities that come with greater use.

LEADING TOGETHER IN GATEWAY CITIES: Lessons from Lawrence

When we ponder the lessons that this case study offers for transformative Gateway City leadership, there are striking commonalities between how the school district and LCW successfully engaged teacher and parent leaders, respectively. A large body of literature suggests one of the fundamental problems poor urban communities face is lack of "collective efficacy" or shared trust and confidence that by working together neighbors can make a difference in the myriad of everyday problems they encounter. Similarly, scholarship in educational leadership shows that teachers in struggling schools often lose hope that they can work together to make a difference in the lives of their students. In both neighborhoods and schools, empowerment is the remedy to this problem.⁶

To empower residents to act, community organizations need to build a sense of community, provide opportunities for citizen participation, and train residents to exercise leadership effectively. By design, the Community Education Circles fulfill all three of these functions.



Drama class at the Boys & Girls Club

Superintendent Riley's model of school autonomy sent an immediate signal to teachers and school leaders that they were empowered to work creatively to use extended learning time to meet the needs of their students as they saw them. By also making resources available to cover the costs of enrichment activities, the school leaders were positioned to quickly see tangible improvements in the learning opportunities afforded to Lawrence youth.

There is one more subplot in the Lawrence story that is pertinent to this collective efficacy thread. While many forces undermine collective efficacy in distressed communities, one of the most common is lack of positive community identity. Facing a barrage of negative media portrayals, residents of low-income communities like Lawrence often internalize problems that are the result of much larger social and economic forces beyond their control. Reversing this narrative and the pessimism it spawns can be incredibly difficult. In Lawrence, the solution proved to be a larger dose of the venom. When a 2012 *Boston Magazine* article labelled Lawrence the "City of the Damned," residents decided they would no longer be voiceless and let others define them. They joined hands and formed the We Are Lawrence campaign.

Leadership theory shows that, like the rallying power of a crisis, perceived injustice can often spur a strong collective response.⁷ In coming together to draw attention to all of the

good in Lawrence that *Boston Magazine* refused to acknowledge, the city's civic leaders were able to motivate aggrieved residents, pointing to all of their accomplishments and generating momentum for collective action as the receivership, the Rivera administration, and the Working Cities Challenge were taking shape.⁸

Gateway Cities looking at strategies for developing collaborative leadership often get stuck by a narrow definition of leadership. They see the same table of dedicated civic leaders who rise to every challenge and wonder how they can ever be more effective without more hands on deck. By placing the power of leadership in the hands of teachers and parents struggling to make their community a better place, the Lawrence Community Partnerships model provides a compelling answer to this quandary.

Endnotes

- 1 For example, see Patricia Baquedano-López and others. “Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools.” *Review of Research in Education* 37(1) (2013).
- 2 David Farbman. “The Case for Improving and Expanding Time in School” (Boston, MA: National Center on Time and Learning, 2015).
- 3 See Ann Crouter and Alan Booth, eds. *Work-Family Challenges for Low-Income Parents and their Children* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 4 “Back from the Brink” (Watertown, MA: Education Resource Strategies, 2015).
- 5 “Massachusetts Takes on a Failing School District” *New York Times* (June 17, 2015).
- 6 Roger Goddard and Yvonne Goddard. “A Multilevel Analysis of the Relationship between Teacher and Collective Efficacy in Urban Schools.” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17(7) (2001); Mary Ohmer. “Citizen Participation in Neighborhood Organizations and its Relationship to Volunteers’ Self-and Collective Efficacy and Sense of Community” *Social Work Research* 31(2) (2007); Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush. “Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods.” *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (1999); John Ross and Peter Gray. “Transformational Leadership and Teacher Commitment to Organizational Values: The Mediating Effects of Collective Teacher Efficacy.” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 17(2) (2006).
- 7 Martijn Van Zomeren and others. “Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action.” *Psychological Bulletin* 134(4) (2008).
- 8 This description of the media influence may appear exaggerated, but those who have worked in these communities will appreciate the powerful stigmatizing influence that the media can have. Much has been written on this topic. For example, see, Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo. *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

This paper is one in a series of case studies examining innovative Gateway City initiatives. Each profile explores the unique dynamics of change in small to midsize urban communities, where resources are limited and social challenges are complex. These papers capture the basic mechanics of the initiative. Then they attempt to distill universal lessons for leaders by looking at how communities come together to make their change effort a success.
