

The power of community

A movement is afoot in Tulsa elementary schools that is making a big impact on students and families.

A new model—When Phil Dressauer was growing up in Tulsa in the 1950s, most everyone in Tulsa was middle class. There was white and there was black, with few other ethnic groups represented. Few people were poor. Most lived in one place and stayed there. There was stability in family life and school life.

At Nathan Hale High School, which Dessauer attended, most students graduated and then started jobs, a perfectly acceptable next step. Only a small group pursued postsecondary education or “some great beyond,” he says. Now, postsecondary education is needed, particularly four-year bachelor’s degrees, to enter into the workforce.

“The whole dynamic was completely different as far as trying to advance the success of everyone,” he says. “It wasn’t needed. Ironically, now it’s needed, but the conditions to help advance that almost by themselves have changed dramatically—the economics, the demographics, the mobility of people.

“So now education and this whole human development, making students successful, helping them be successful, the challenge of it has just completely changed—the magnitude, the complexities. So we had to come up with a new ‘think’ about how to do this.”

Dessauer and the Community Service Council (CSC) of Great Tulsa, a local research and planning organization for which he serves as executive director, first began to recognize these trends in the 1980s, when the CSC created the Tulsa Area Coalition on Perinatal Care. That organization has since become the Family Health Coalition, which offers a variety of programs to ensure healthy starts for Tulsa infants.

By 1990, the CSC had shifted its organizational thinking, Dessauer says, aiming to become more proactive in preventing problems in human development rather than reacting to needs and developing new services and programs. That’s when the CSC got involved with early childhood development and child health initiatives, looking at how it could integrate community resources into schools to take a holistic approach to meeting students’ needs.

Dessauer says the CSC recognized that families and students were facing challenges stemming from economic situations dating back to the 1970s, if not before, challenges that had manifested in the form of generational poverty, lack of health care, hunger and other barriers.

Other models had been introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Communities in Schools, a national network of professionals working in public schools to surround students with a community of support.

Dessauer wanted to take these services a step further. He wanted the schools to build partnerships with community resources to develop healthy students and families, as well as for the schools to develop relationships with the families they served.

“From the get-go, we always had the vision that what really needed to happen was (to) integrate the use of other re-



From left, Mark Twain student Dilynn Calwell; volunteer Megan White; student Courtney Dover; camp Director Denise McKinney; volunteer Lanie McKinney; Gretchen Guillette, Redeemer Covenant Church outreach coordinator; student Haley Barela; student Nicole Fultz; volunteer Robin West; and student Nicoe Knighten work on autobiographical poems as part of the DreamBuilders Rhythm & Art Camp, a joint effort of Redeemer Covenant and Calvary Temple churches.

sources in the schools, whether it was nutrition programs, health care services, mental health care services, developing the neighborhood to be more stable,” he says. “All the dimensions of development ultimately focus back on getting some kind of quality outcome for the students and for the families into an overall integrated, very ‘intentional’ program.”

In 2005, Jan Creveling, CSC’s Senior planner for community schools, and Dessauer attended the National Coalition for Community Schools Forum in Chicago and were surprised to see Kiger and her assistant principal, who also wanted to learn about the model. After meeting with coalition staff in Washington, D.C., who recommended she bring a team of community representatives to the 2006 forum, Creveling contacted community school leaders around the country to learn from their experiences.

In 2006, a group of 32 Tulsa representatives traveled to Baltimore for the Community Schools Forum. It was this gathering that spurred David Sawyer, then Tulsa Public Schools’ superintendent, to invite Tulsa schools to become community schools and Dr. Cathy Burden, Union Public Schools superintendent, to determine that all of that district’s Title I schools should become community schools.

In 2007, the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) was established through the Tulsa Metropolitan Human Services Commission. Administered by the CSC, TACSI includes two staff members, Creveling and school liaison Genie Shannon; a resource center at the CSC; a management team with leaders from Union and Tulsa public schools and other stakeholders; and a community steering committee comprising partners, funders and CSC board members.

That year, 18 schools began their development as community schools and received funding from community foundations or corporations for community school coordinators; in 2010, six others were identified as inquiring schools.

By 2008-2009, TACSI was working to develop a process to sustain the initiative and designed and implemented an evaluation plan. Additionally, it hosted community school training for interested new schools to educate their site teams, which include the principal, local business owners, faith partners, families and school staff.

TACSI has other teams in place as well. Community school principals make up TACSI’s implementation teams, which meet monthly to share what is working in their buildings, Shannon says.

In addition to connecting community school advocates and serving as a voice for community schools in Tulsa, TACSI works to engage resources in the community with individual schools through monthly partner meetings and meets with school leadership and staff to ensure they have developed goals and have the professional development they need.

Community schools also focus on the concept of “collective trust,” Dessauer says—trust between the school staffs and their constituents, trust between the families and the students, trust between the community resources and the schools and trust between the individual school sites and district administration.

“All these are relationships that have to be forged into a much stronger, interwoven commitment together,” he says. “And that’s really the essence when you talk about community schools. ... It’s the nurturing, the founding, the development of these trusting relationships that in turn have the capacity to develop this more ... successful approach for everybody working together.”