

Persistence



Pays

Off

This is the story of two high schools: One was a “dropout factory.” The other is seeing remarkable success, and many of its recent graduates are the first in their families to attend college. What makes the story remarkable is that the two schools are the same—or, at least, they have occupied the same building. The school is Van Horn High School in Independence, MO, an inner-ring suburb of 115,000 located east of Kansas City, MO.

It might be wrong to call the present Van Horn the same school as its predecessor because so much has changed. The school was transferred to another school district in July 2008, resulting in the complete turnover of its faculty members and administrators. Whereas Van Horn once served students not only from Independence but also from throughout Kansas City, the school now serves children who live only in the immediate vicinity, which mostly comprises older neighborhoods that have significant poverty and changing demographics. One constant, however, is that the community was always present in the school, hoping, working, organizing, and fighting for the school, the families, and the neighborhood.

The story illustrates what a community school—fully embraced and properly understood—can become when it effectively connects with students, families, social services, and neighborhood revitalization.

The community and a local nonprofit join forces to turn around a low-performing school.

Community Support

The Local Investment Commission (LINC), a Kansas City–based nonprofit, has been involved with Van Horn High School for more than 15 years, working to make the school a center of the community. From the outset, LINC was dedicated to bottom-up, citizen engagement through the development of site councils composed of parents, neighbors, teachers, and principals—a key feature of providing guidance, leadership, and boots on the ground at each of its community schools.

Early on, the Van Horn site council was committed to focusing on the community. It formed its own nonprofit community development corporation, built a \$4 million senior housing complex (the largest investment in the neighborhood in years), and worked to provide health services for students and the neighborhood. But despite the success of the community work, comparable success inside the school was elusive. One community leader said, “There was nothing to pull the students together as a student body. Things that were done were done by the community, around the community.”

For many years the Kansas City (MO) School District had used Van Horn as an alternative school, with students being bused considerable distances. Few cocurricular activities were offered, and all athletic games (even homecoming) were held off school grounds. The school’s once-vibrant fine arts programs died off, as did industrial arts education.

Van Horn High School

INDEPENDENCE, MO

GRADES 9–12

ENROLLMENT 825

COMMUNITY Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS 65% White, 18% Hispanic, 14% Black, 3% Asian; 70% free or reduced-price lunch

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM 1 principal, 1 associate principal, 1 assistant principal, 1 activities director

FACULTY 70 staff and faculty members

Even so, the community still fought for the school. Twice there were publicly announced plans to close Van Horn, but both times, the neighborhood, the community, and the alumni rallied to keep the school open. The community leader recalled, “They knew if they lost the high school, they were sunk.”

The failure of the school became well-known when it was designated a “dropout factory” in a 2007 national study by the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at John Hopkins University in cooperation with the Associated Press, which disseminated the results. The study listed high schools that had an “average promoting power” of less than 60% over a three-year period (the graduation classes of 2004, 2005, and 2006). According to the report, the graduation rate at Van Horn

was 34%, the second-lowest rate among Missouri’s 458 high schools; statewide 19 high schools made the dropout factory list (Center for Social Organization of Schools, 2007). Although portions of the study received some criticism, including its overall report and the validity of the data and methodology, the news media coverage at the time confirmed what the community already knew: students at Van Horn were not doing well.

That same year, community members, led by religious leaders, revived on-again, off-again efforts to transfer seven schools (Van Horn, a middle school, and five elementary schools) from the Kansas City School District to the adjacent Independence School District. In November 2007, voters in both school districts approved the transfer. The change brought renewed focus, effort, investment, and community attention to all the schools and a clear articulation of what a school means to families and neighborhoods.

Independence School Superintendent Jim Hinson told the community,

There are activities at the school that encourage [not only] parents and families of those students, but also neighbors of those schools who may no longer have children at the school, to be actively engaged with that school where, hopefully, neighborhood activities occur as well. (Independence, MO, School District & Hinson, 2010, p. 17)

He added, “Families and parents understand that schools are more than places where their child receives an education; they are also places where parents and families can receive

Key Features of Successful Community School High Schools

- Lead partner organization
- Community school coordinator
- Robust, reciprocal partnerships
- Focused leadership
- Essential programs and services
 - After-school, weekend, and summer programs
 - Academic support
 - Mentoring
 - College and career preparation
 - University partnerships
 - Culturally relevant programs
 - Parent engagement
 - Health services and education
 - Youth and community nutrition
- Shared results: graduation

Source: Axelroth, R. (2009). The community schools approach: Raising graduation and college going rates—Community high school case studies. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership.

“Everyone has told me that if I go to college I will get a higher paying job and it will [be] beneficial for my future, but nobody told me how I was going to get there.”

services and assistance and resources that they need” (Independence, MO, School District & Hinson, 2010, p. 18).

Turning the Corner

In its first year as part of Independence School District, Van Horn’s student population fell to less than 600, but it has grown every year since. The school’s programming underwent an even more dramatic transformation. Today there is a stronger academic focus, more cocurricular activities, and extensive community involvement.

There are visible changes in the physical plant. Three weeks before the start of the 2008–09 school year, more than 2,000 volunteers worked at the transferred schools painting, landscaping, and cleaning in an effort the district called “Extreme School Makeover.” In 2009, voters approved a districtwide \$85 million districtwide bond issue to purchase new heating and cooling systems, new artificial turf for the now-utilized athletic fields, and exterior improvements.

The new school climate has enabled Van Horn to realize more of the key features of successful community-school high schools that were identified by the Coalition for Community Schools, such as reciprocal partnerships; after-school, weekend, and summer programming; and health services (Axelroth, 2009). Community support has grown; new partnerships have been created and existing partnerships expanded; and the high school is acknowledged as the

center of a major community revitalization that includes new residents, construction of new in-fill housing, greater city investment, and new opportunities.

But nowhere is the climate change more evident than inside the school. “We can do so much in the classrooms,” said Patrick Layden, an assistant principal who also teaches AP US Government and Politics. “We can do so much as administration and counselors. But we need that community support to not only change the school but also the city and the community.”

The most tangible evidence of Van Horn’s success is students going on to postsecondary education. Van Horn is in its third year of participating in the National College Advising Corps (NCAC), which works to increase postsecondary participation among high school students in low-income communities. During the 2011–12 school year, the program will expand to 350 high schools in 17 states and will serve approximately 105,000 students.

Through the Missouri NCAC program, the University of Missouri hires recent college graduates for a two-year commitment. Those graduates serve as full-time college access

Conditions for Learning

1. The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.
2. Students are motivated and engaged in learning—both in school and in community settings and during and after school.
3. The basic physical, mental, and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.
4. There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families, and school staff members.
5. Community engagement, together with school efforts, promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and that connects students to a broader learning community.

Source: Blank, M., Melaville, A., & Shah, B. (2003). Making the difference: Research and practice in community schools. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools.

The Local Investment Commission (www.kclinc.org)

has one of the most extensive community schools efforts in the country and has a significant presence as an organizer of community schools in seven school districts.

Combined enrollment at its community schools (known as Caring Communities sites) is approximately 30,000 students as of 2010. The student demographics are 50% Black, 32% White, and 16% Hispanic. Of those students, 71.9% receive free and reduced-price lunch.

The Coalition for Community Schools (www.communityschools.org)

is hosted by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL; www.iel.org) in Washington, DC, and offers some of the best information about building community schools—difficult work for which few principals and administrators have received professional development or academic training.

IEL also promotes leadership in education through its Educational Policy Fellowship Program (www.epfp.org), a 10-month leadership development program with multiple state programs across the country.

advisers who work closely with school counselors to develop peer-to-peer relationships with high school seniors to encourage them to pursue postsecondary education.

A College-Going Culture

The results at Van Horn are impressive: full-time enrollment is up, more students are going to college, and more students are staying in college. For the 2010–11 school year, of a total 675 students, 115 received assistance with a college application and 336 took a college campus tour, and students were accepted at 39 postsecondary institutions.

“The impact here has been pretty dramatic about getting kids into the mind-set that postsecondary options are actually an option,” said Layden. “A lot of our kids have really struggled with that because they come from households where not only did their parents not graduate from college, but also a lot of them didn’t graduate from high school.”

As one student who received college guidance said, “Everyone has told me that if I go to college I will get a higher paying job and it will [be] beneficial for my future, but nobody told



me how I was going to get there.” Van Horn is turning that around.

The long-term success of Van Horn is yet to be determined, but the story is instructive.

It is easy to lose the simple logic behind community schools among the myriad reforms, initiatives, and grant-inspired endeavors and to miss the fundamental nature of the work: schools and communities need each other in ways readily acknowledged, but rarely acted upon. No one grant or program is sufficient to achieve what is needed: students learning, stronger families, and stable neighborhoods. Communities cannot do it alone, nor can dedicated educators achieve it by themselves. **PL**

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