Beyond the 3R’s

Schools step up social services in hopes of improving education

Part one of four

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By Eleanor Chute / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Cornell superintendent Aaron Thomas interviews a potential administrator, he wants to know if the candidate will drive a school van. Administrators, including the superintendent, sometimes need to drive a parent to a teacher conference or a child to a doctor appointment.

At Grandview Upper Elementary School in the Highlands School District, it’s not unusual for principal Heather Hauser to find a bag of groceries on her desk, left anonymously by a staff member. The school started a food pantry after a student one Friday said he didn’t have anything to eat at home.

At Pittsburgh Faison K-5 in Homewood, the nonprofit Homewood Children’s Village provides extra sets of hands to help in the high-poverty school, among them a community school site director, four den advisers who help tutor and four social work interns who call families when children are absent and find ways to help.

School isn’t about just reading, writing and arithmetic.

**Beyond the 3R’s**

Teachers are the most important school-controlled factor in learning, but many other factors play important roles as well.

This four-part series examines tackling the other factors.

**TODAY: Overview**

**MONDAY: Trauma**

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Using their own staff and community partners, public schools are finding ways to address the many needs of children — such as hunger, homelessness, violence in their homes or communities, grief, mental health issues and inadequate clothing — that are barriers to their learning.

“The issues that kids have are not left at the schoolhouse door,” said Baldwin High School social worker Annette Fiovaniss.

Ms. Hauser recalled a child who sometimes melted down in the morning. “The first thing I would do is say, ‘Let me see your feet.’ When he didn’t have socks on, I knew that day for him was difficult.”

She got him clean socks at the nurse’s office. “That helped put his day back together,” she said.

While some researchers found teachers are the most important school-related factor, outside factors — including individual and family characteristics — may have four to eight times the impact as teachers do on student achievement, according to a Rand Corp. report.

Kellie Irwin, who has been a school social worker in Woodland Hills for more than 30 years, said, “A lot of my job is trying to get the kids to a place they can learn. … You can’t expect a child to score well on the Keystone Exams or the algebra test or whatever subject you want if they are hungry, they don’t have proper clothing or they don’t know where they’re going to sleep that night.”

In Allegheny County, all school districts provide free or reduced-price school lunch to needy students. Most districts also serve breakfast, and a few offer a snack, too. In Pittsburgh and a handful of other districts, so many students are needy that all get the food free.

Some agencies or volunteers help to provide food to take home on Fridays as well, including a new effort by the Buhl Foundation in partnership with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and FOCUS North America, an Orthodox Christian organization, that this fall will begin providing weekend food for nearly 2,000 North Side students.

Some schools provide clothes for students as needed. Pittsburgh Langley K-8 in Sheraden has coats on hand in the winter. Baldwin High School staff donated clothes for a needy student when an email told of the need and the sizes. For years, Pittsburgh Lincoln PreK-5 has had a washer and dryer to help students whose clothes are dirty.
Some of the barriers, such as food and housing insecurity, are related to poverty. Nationwide, 22 percent of children under age 18 are living in poverty, with 19 percent in Pennsylvania, according to Annie E. Casey Foundation data from 2013, the latest available figures.

At the same time, many students are receiving human services. In Pittsburgh Public Schools, 53 percent of the students had prior involvement with at least one of 14 child welfare, behavioral health, support programs, intellectual disability and juvenile justice programs, according to the county Department of Human Services. In the Clairton School District, the figure was 74 percent.

Students receiving services face challenges to do well in school, or even to show up. In Pittsburgh Public Schools, more than half of the students who missed 20 percent of the school year in 2011-12 are involved in the human services system, according to a county report. Most students who missed that much school have GPAs that fall below 2.5, according to the report.

**Needs rise, staff shrinks**

While many schools have staff members tackling social service needs, such resources are often limited.

On average, statewide in 2013-14 when K-12 public school enrollment totaled more than 1.7 million students, there was one guidance counselor for every 409 students. There was an average of the full-time equivalent of 1 nurse for every 877 students, with many school nurses traveling from one building to another. And in a state with 500 school districts, there was just the full-time equivalent of 250 social workers.

“I haven’t met one school which has enough social workers for the work they have,” said Samantha Murphy, resource services manager in the integrated services program of the county Department of Human Services.

Beyond their own staffs, schools also are relying on outside groups for help.

Every school district in Allegheny County has a behavioral health partnership with an outside agency in the high schools. Many also have them in the middle school and some in the elementary schools. Some provide one-on-one therapy. Highlands even has partial hospitalization programs for children and adolescents — providing treatment and education — in its middle school.

Dawn Gordon, social worker at Pittsburgh Westinghouse 6-12, said behavioral health services provide “another support for that family to be successful. In a school unlike Westinghouse that does not have this service, more than likely that parent is being called several times a day. The kid may be suspended. This alleviates a lot of that.”

The behavioral health providers also offer prevention services — such as small groups or classes on grief, drugs and alcohol, and developing positive habits — and do crisis counseling when tragedy strikes.
The outside behavioral health professionals also often sit on a school’s student assistance program team, usually made up of an administrator, guidance counselor, nurse and teachers. Such teams try to find school or external resources for students.

Depending on the service, the costs are paid by the state, county or local schools or, in the case of one-on-one therapy, usually by the student’s private insurance or Medicaid.

One external resource is the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System, which this school year will serve eight school districts.

Pittsburgh Mercy overall provided individual outpatient therapy to 1,100 students and served more than 6,500 children in prevention and intervention programs directly in schools in 2014-15. In addition, it also served 160 school-age children and their families in their homes.

In addition to behavioral health help, the Pittsburgh district has agreements with 89 outside partners.

At Pittsburgh Westinghouse 6-12 in Homewood where about two dozen organizations are involved, a school committee is looking at a community school model that would provide a community hub and coordination.

**Encouraged by results**

While some of the impact of the help is hard to quantify, some organizations see encouraging results.

The Homewood Children’s Village points to increased GPAs — from 1.98 to 2.68 over three years — of participants in the Bridge to College program at Westinghouse offered by the village in partnership with the YMCA Lighthouse Project. It also provides extra staff at Faison K-5 in Homewood and Lincoln PreK-5, both of which improved enough to be honored last school year as STAR schools by the district, although the school’s own staff and others can share the credit.

Another organization, Communities in Schools in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, a nonprofit that has worked with schools in the region for three decades, has seen improvements as well.

Bridget Clement, executive director of Communities in Schools in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, said that 72 percent of students who received case management help from a site coordinator improved their school attendance to 90 percent or higher, half improved their behavior significantly and about a quarter increased their academic performance.

Pittsburgh Mercy has found success in Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh, in which fifth- and eighth-grade students learn ballroom dancing as a way to teach respect, teamwork and self-confidence. Twenty Pittsburgh Public schools, two charter schools and two Catholic schools will take part this school year.
Mark Rogalsky, unit manager, prevention services, Pittsburgh Mercy Community Health, said 77 percent of parents last school year saw positive changes in their children who participated in the dancing program, including 40 percent who said their children got along better at school.

Bob Wegner, program supervisor of the SNAP — Stop Now And Plan — program offered by Holy Family Institute, said the results of surveys taken before and after the 13-week program show an 89 percent decrease in antisocial behavior. Holy Family has a variety of education and social services for children and families.

“If you don’t have kids sitting at their desks due to behavior issues, you’re not going to get to the 3R’s,” said Diane Giovanazzi, director of the community programs at Holy Family.

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