

THE COMMUNITY AGENDA FOR AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The challenges our nation faces in educating all of our young people are alarming. Yet in seeking solutions we too often find ourselves divided. Public schools are too fundamental to our democratic values to leave isolated from other community institutions. This does not serve our children well. We must act collectively.

Schools now enroll the most diverse group of young people in our history, and we know that their progress depends on the environment in which they live and learn. We see stagnant high school graduation rates and unacceptably low performance in math and science. Too many students are disengaged, and too many young people are seen as problems rather than as individuals with assets, hopes and dreams. As citizens, we are less involved with our schools and in our democracy. Community issues – poverty, violence, family stability, substance abuse are school issues.

These are realities – not excuses. Surely our schools need qualified teachers and strong principals, and like all public institutions they must be accountable. But just as surely we know that our young people and their families need more connections, more support, more opportunities, and more learning time to be successful. We can and we must do both. We must create effective schools that have robust relationships with families and other community institutions.

We cannot make this happen without a willingness to work together. Missing from the education reform and accountability debate, however, is serious dialogue about how to harness the shared capacity of our schools and communities to achieve our common goals.

Therefore, we propose The Community Agenda for America's Public Schools.

The Community Agenda is built on four core beliefs

- **Communities and schools are fundamentally and positively interconnected.** Engaged communities build strong schools; effective schools are essential to strong communities.
- **Schools can make a difference in the lives of *all* children.** The quality of schools matter. High academic standards, rigorous curricula, aligned tests, clear incentives, high quality teachers, and strong professional development, and effective leadership are important factors for student success.
- **Children do better when their families do better.** We recognize this inextricable connection and actively support the strengthening and empowering of families.
- **The development of the whole child is a critical factor for student success.** Children grow into successful adulthood through high-quality instructional opportunities in school and out of school, by exploring their talents and interests through experiences that stretch their aspirations and by receiving the social, emotional, and physical support they need to succeed.

At the heart of our Community Agenda is a *commitment to work together to create strong and purposeful partnerships* for change and results.

This idea – fully embraced – would make all Americans responsible and accountable for excellent schools and the positive development of all our young people. Every institution that influences positive outcomes for children and youth must be part of the agenda - schools, families,

government, youth development organizations, health, mental health and family support agencies, higher education and faith-based institutions, community organizing and community development groups, unions and business. Each brings assets and expertise, and each must change how it does its work, and all must work together to close the opportunity gap that many of our children and youth face.

The Results We Seek

We believe results matter. Experience tells us that when schools and community partners align their resources toward common results young people will succeed. These are the results we seek for all students:

- Children enter school healthy and ready to learn.
- Students are engaged, motivated to learn and involved in their communities.
- Students learn in positive, safe and respectful environments before, during and after school.
- Children and young adolescents are healthy – physically, socially and emotionally.
- Families are actively involved in the education of their children and are committed to post-secondary opportunities for them.
- Children and youth live in self-sufficient and supportive families and communities.
- Young people succeed academically and graduate from high school ready for post-secondary education, careers and success as family and community members.

When we achieve these results young people will have the knowledge and sophisticated skills they need to contribute to the economy and the confidence, competences and commitment to family and community needed to sustain a just and effective democracy.

Strategies that Work

The capacity and energy of a whole community of partners belongs at The Community Agenda table. Schools and their community partners must work together to support the core teaching, learning, and development purposes of education and to strengthen families, and the community.

A growing number of schools and their communities are moving in this direction. They are reclaiming their schools as centers of community. These places are called community schools by many, but by other names as well – community learning centers, full service community schools, schools as hubs, community-based integrated student supports at schools. These places have already begun the transformation we envision in their curriculum and instruction, scheduling, school layout, and especially relationships and responsibilities among school staff, students, families and community partners. They rely on multiple inter-related strategies to achieve results:

- **High expectations focused on high achievement encourage students to move forward.** Every adult in the community acts on the belief that all students can learn, succeed, and contribute to society.
- **A focus on real-world learning engages students.** Students apply their learning through service learning, civic and environmental education, and see the relevance of their coursework in their lives. Moreover, youth and the school itself help to solve problems in their own community.

- **Bridging school and community resources helps students broaden their skills and aspirations.** School and community resource are integrated to provide academic support, enrichment opportunities, mentoring relationships with caring adults, internship and job training opportunities, conflict resolution training and more. These opportunities encourage students to discover their unique assets and talents (academic, artistic, athletic, musical, leadership, and scientific) and develop socially and emotionally.
- **Addressing barriers to learning supports student success.** Schools address social, emotional, physical and mental health issues affecting individual students and their families, as well as the entire school community, before major problems erupt.
- **School facilities are welcoming to all.** Schools are open to students, families and community members – spanning the generations – for learning and recreation, before and after traditional school hours, into the evenings, on weekends and summers.

Effective implementation of these strategies requires local capacity to build and bring together community leadership, manage school and community resources, and engage everyone in the work of improving the lives of young Americans.

Policy Recommendations for The Community Agenda

The following recommendations will guide the signatories to The Community Agenda as we work to craft policies that support our goals of enhancing the learning and development of all our young people as well as strengthening schools, families and communities.

Results-focused Partnerships

Through results-focused partnerships all government and community institutions can be aligned and applied in a more coordinated and effective fashion. We propose that federal, state, and local government leaders provide concrete incentives that improve the coordination of existing funding streams and support broad-based, local coalitions designed to develop and sustain partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

Youth, Parent and Community Involvement

The people and places affected by public policy must have a voice in its implementation. Policy must enable youth, parents, and community leaders to be partners in the planning and oversight of school reform and related family and community initiatives.

A Broad-Based Accountability Framework

A single standardized test should not be the basis for judging schools or students. We recommend an accountability model that includes multiple measures of academic achievement as well as measures of engagement, attendance, social, emotional and ethical competencies, physical well-being, and family and community involvement. Further, government and community leaders must be accountable for creating conditions that enable young people and their families to thrive.

Public Access to Data

Data that goes beyond test scores are critical if schools, families and communities are to identify challenges and work together. All public agencies concerned with children, youth and families should make disaggregated data available to the public on an array of indicators related to student learning and development as well as key family and community factors.

Professional Development and Capacity-Building

Policymakers must ensure that teachers, principals, other school personnel and people in social work, youth development, health and mental health, and community development are of high quality, and have the training and ability to work more effectively with families and communities and with each other.

Increased Investments

Ensuring that disadvantaged students in under-resourced communities have access to an excellent and equitable education has been the cornerstone of national policy for more than 40 years. The Community Agenda calls for adequate – and additional - funding for essential school functions; early care and education; out-of-school time enrichment opportunities; mentoring; preventive health, mental health, and family services; family and community engagement; and service, civic, and environmental learning opportunities.

Our Call to Action

Equal access to a high quality education and the support students need to succeed are fundamental to our democracy. Student success is critical for all Americans, young and old, and for our future as a nation.

The President and the Congress should designate a Commission including key Cabinet secretaries and other national, state, and local leaders concerned with youth, family, and community to launch a national conversation on The Community Agenda and define specific legislative and programmatic recommendations for its implementation. The recommendations of the Commission should lead to a White House Summit on improving results for children, families, and communities.

As signatories, we embrace the challenge of The Community Agenda for America's Public Schools. We urge our national, state and local leaders to immediately adopt policies guided by the core beliefs and recommendations we have set forth. We call upon all those engaged in leading, managing or supporting schools, families, and communities to make The Community Agenda their own. We invite you to join us.

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