

### Districts expand social services to support families

Amid rapidly changing student and community demographics, many school districts have morphed from education centers into community centers. These districts offer medical care, housing assistance, free meals and other social services.

“Schools are the centers of communities,” says Kayla Jackson, a project director at AASA, The School Superintendents Association. “It’s an easy entry point for any type of social services.”

This approach allows administrators to confront more effectively the academic impact of students’ nonacademic problems, such as health, homelessness and incarcerated parents, Jackson says.

#### ‘The future of public schools’

Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma—a district of 16,000 students with a free and reduced-price lunch rate of 70 percent—experienced dramatic demographic shifts over the past decade and has become a minority-majority district.

“We realized that not only do our kids need additional supports and wrap-around services, but we also have to make sure that our community understands that this is their public school,” says Superintendent Kirt Hartzler.

The district partnered with the University of Oklahoma to open medical clinics at two of its highest poverty elementary schools. Care is provided to students, parents and community members.

Union Public Schools also teamed with other organizations to offer mental health care, nutrition programs for students and parents, free immunizations for all students, and a range of early childhood and adult education options.

When the district opened a new elementary school, administrators decided to create a “community school village” that would be used seven days a week, Hartzler says. The city of Tulsa and local non-profits helped build the 32-acre village, which, when completed late this year, will include the school, a community garden and kitchen, and a medical center.



**FORGING PARTNERSHIPS**—Union Public Schools in Tulsa has partnered with the University of Oklahoma and local organizations to provide health care and other family-related services to improve academics and attendance.

“I firmly believe this could be the future of public schools,” Hartzler says. Graduation rates and the number of National Merit Scholars have increased, and there is higher AP class enrollment and family engagement, he adds.

Finding funding can be difficult, Hartzler says. Administrators must show community organizations why they should help the district. However, as time goes on, successful programs begin to sell themselves.

#### A holistic approach

Today’s district leaders better understand how health and socioeconomic factors can impede students’ ability to learn, says Pia Escudero, director of the student health and human services division for Los Angeles USD.

Traditionally, districts would refer families to external services. However, long work hours and transportation issues, among other reasons, prevent families from using those resources, Escudero says.

LAUSD now offers mental health, dental and vision screenings, in addition to wellness and immigrant student services. “We’re bringing more prevention and early intervention services to schools

so students can get the services and not miss school, and have access to better health care quicker,” Escudero says.

Specialized counselors now support students in foster care and those dealing with homelessness.

State funding designated for vulnerable students supports these programs.

“When you consider the whole child, the instructional program is not enough,” Escudero says. “You have to think holistically about preparing a district that’s able to do various partnerships.”

#### Advice for administrators

Administrators can be innovative when funding community programs, says Jackson, of AASA. For example, Medicaid may reimburse districts for providing medical services, while state and federal funds may pay for universal free-breakfast programs.

Superintendents should seek inspiration from peers and models that have worked in similar districts, Jackson says. They also need to understand the roots of the issues impacting their schools and the funding resources available, because districts do not always have to take on additional expenses to implement solutions, she adds.

—Alison DeNisco