

Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, USA

Westside Elementary

**Why schools should nurture
parents as well as children**



**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL**
Community
Collaboration

FUNDAÇÃO
Lemann



**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL
PRIZES**

Table of Contents

02	—	Introduction
03	—	School Profile
04	—	Context and Challenge
07	—	Expertise and Approach
11	—	Outcomes and Results
12	—	Key Steps
17	—	Advice and Guidance



Introduction

Westside Elementary is a K-5 community school in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, United States, whose core belief is that nurturing children and their parents with love and compassion allows young people to thrive. The school strives to be a neighbourhood hub that brings together families, educators and community partners for the betterment of those in the wider community and the students themselves. It's not uncommon to see a mother call a teacher when she runs out of baby formula or families going through the school's food pantry. At Westside Elementary, the wellbeing of its students and the people in their lives takes precedence over all else and it partners with a number of organisations to achieve this.



Profile:

**Country:**

United States of America

**Region:**

Sun Prairie, Wisconsin

**School type:**

Public school

**Location area:**

City

**Student population:**

301 to 500

**Prize Category:**

Community Collaboration

**“We built this
super strong
connection with
our students and
our families where
they feel this is a
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have this need,
can you please
help me”**

- Nikki Burke, Principal
of Westside
Elementary



In-depth look

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

Westside is one of five schools in the city of Sun Prairie using the community school model as an equity strategy. Under this model, the distribution of school populations is determined by need and this often leads to a disproportionate number of students who have certain needs being placed at some elementary schools more than others. Westside receives a considerable number of students who experience difficulties due to their socioeconomic status. Currently, 68% of students receive either free or reduced-cost meals and 52% of students are children of colour.

Research reviewed by the school demonstrates that students are more successful

when their parents are able to support their child's learning at home.

The school's needs assessment revealed the need for regular opportunities for parents/caregivers to get support with helping their child learn and develop at home, developing English language skills, and improving their parenting skills. These needs made the school reflect on how best to navigate and address these challenges. In addition, the school was looking to increase and sustain family engagement across the board, in particular families whose students were struggling academically. Many caregivers were found to be busy or over-committed and



struggled to attend traditional events like PTA meetings or open houses. After school and evening don't always work, thus, there was a need for the school to better serve families who were at times stressed and wanted to be more involved in the wider school community.



“We never want a barrier to prevent kids and community members from attending our programming.”

- Stacey Darga, Community Schools Site Coordinator at Westside Elementary



EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

At Westside Elementary, the wellbeing of its students and the people in their lives is paramount and it collaborates with organisations in the community to achieve this. “We say: ‘we love them first and then they’ll learn,’ says Stacey Darga, Community Schools Site Coordinator at Westside Elementary. “We want them in this building, we want them to know that they’re loved and that they’re safe and then the learning will come.”

“Both the service delivered, the collaboration and the collective decision-making is something that is foundational within the community school model,” Jamie Racine, the Community Schools Manager, says. “I think that it allows a space that really elevates the dignity and pride in where folks live, and where kids go to school and where people can work”.

The strategy depends on high-quality partnerships to provide quality and appropriate services to students and families. The school noted that without strong partners, this kind of programming would not be successful and focuses on developing a strong record of collaboration and partnership with many local actors, creating a network that helps provide a range of supporting programmes for students and their families. The school launched a number of initiatives that helped encourage more engagement between the school and students’ families. During the lockdown, support to parents and caregivers would take place virtually, where they would be given the tools to help aid their child’s learning.

For instance, because the school is one of the most diverse elementary schools in the local area when it realised that some parents and caregivers needed extra support with English language skills, it took action by partnering with



a local adult education organisation, The Literacy Network, to provide adult classes in English as a second language. Adult English as second language classes is held twice a year in the Autumn and Winter for eight-week sessions. As the classes became so popular, the school decided to offer beginner and intermediate classes. These classes helped support parents by allowing them to communicate better with teachers and school staff, navigate life in Sun Prairie and the greater Dane County area, and improve opportunities to pursue further education and job attainment.

Collaborating with the Rooted Family, a group that teaches mindfulness, the school holds parenting classes twice a year for six weeks. Classes teach strategies based on brain development, building healthy relationships between parents and their children, and supporting parents in raising confident children.


The school also puts on healthy cooking and active lifestyle classes for families with another partner, the University of Wisconsin Extension – Nutrition department. Partnering with a local church, therapy support groups are arranged for those suffering from bereavement.

Before the advent of COVID, the school had four family literacy events and programmes every year that focused on improving different links between family engagement and student learning such as literacy at home, youth recognition, parenting, healthy lifestyles and mental health. The topics were identified by families in the programme that had an interest in attending and learning more and the events were hosted in the evenings to accommodate parent schedules. Generally, a meal was provided along with childcare if needed, to encourage attendance. These classes were held in person,



pre-COVID, and were offered virtually for families during the lockdown periods. The classes were offered for those looking for support in their ability to effectively raise their children. The curriculum offered strategies based on brain development, building healthy relationships between parents and their children and supporting parents in raising confident children. Parents had the opportunity to not only develop their own skills, but they were able to build relationships with other parents in their community to develop a support network for themselves.



The background of the slide is a photograph of a school building with large windows on the left and a garden with green plants and a wooden border in the foreground. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text.

“One thing that Westside does extraordinarily well is that in the relationships and partnerships that are built with students, families, with community partners, it’s based on a symbiotic relationship where it’s not one person giving or one person receiving, but it really is a collaborative effort of how we all can work together to make our community stronger.”

- Jamie Racine, Community Schools Manager at Westside Elementary



OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The school was able to pinpoint the needs that students' families had – one such example was that families were telling school faculty that the local community food pantry was only open during certain hours and families were only allowed to visit twice a month. For many families, that wasn't enough as food insecurity was a real challenge, so the school partnered with the local food pantry and Second Harvest Food Bank. Now the school has an on-site food pantry that acts as a satellite food pantry for families, so on the week families cannot be served by the local food pantry, they can still get food from the pantry the school hosts.

Families who regularly attended programmes with the school had the opportunity to develop skills that allowed them to help their children learn and grow, while also building positive

relationships with the school and programme staff. By strengthening family engagement, students felt more supported and connected to their learning, which in turn boosted their academic achievement.

The English language classes also allowed families to improve their spoken language skills considerably, and the lessons became open to everyone in the wider community. Access to these opportunities was also helped by the fact they were free.



Key Steps

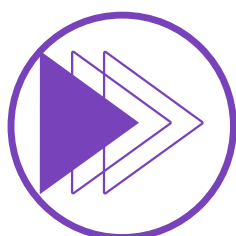


COLLABORATION LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICE

Prior to becoming a community school, members of the Youth and Family Commission with the city researched the community school model, including visiting many in other states and cities. One theme felt throughout was the need for the school to have collaborative leadership with many voices heard at the table. From day one, the school invited leaders of the community, business partners, school district office staff, school staff, school principal, students and families to partner to help shape the direction of the community school. They act as members of Westside Elementary's Site Leadership Team and have shared leadership and decision-making practices in the processes, policies and procedures of the school; using data and data systems available from the local, state and federal level.



As a result of being at the table, these groups became stakeholders and had a vested interest in ensuring the success of the school. Westside Elementary has had a highly successful Site Leadership Team since its inception with four of the current members being founding members. The team meets monthly to review needs assessment, review data and help shape the future direction of the community school.



CLARIFYING PURPOSES AND GOALS

The school become a hub of the community and a life-long learning institution that enhances community-wide engagement by developing programmes and projects such as the school's family learning and literacy programmes, its garden, its food pantry satellite location, physical activity programmes, financial literacy programmes and other community engagement programmes and events.





IDENTIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITH STRONG PARTNERS

The school utilises its community school strategy to implement high-quality programming focused on improving student outcomes. The strategy depends on high-quality partnerships to provide quality and appropriate services to students and families. Without strong partners, the school determined, programming would not be successful; the school has historically had a strong record of collaboration and partnership with many partners.

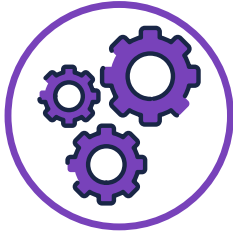


NETWORKING

It became vital to determine the players and their roles within the network of partners the school cultivated over the years. The school decides on how best to celebrate the achievements of partner programmes and works to ensure full community involvement. It was important to build a stronger rapport with the members within different partnerships. The school also realised it was important to determine how each person

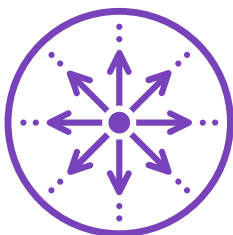


prefers to be recognised and that plans made within these partnerships included the broadest demographic.



COOPERATING

In addition to sharing information and altering service delivery, collaborators shared resources to reach common goals. These resources included labour, space and equipment, and financial contributions. For example, partner agencies in the past contributed to the school's staffing, arranged meeting spaces, offered financial support, or provided educational materials to offer a new after-school activity to the school's youth in their community, such as the YMCA.

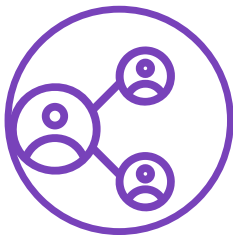


OPEN STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES

Establishing clear communication paths should be a key part of developing this expertise and the school realised this was best developed by creating a system where the structure and processes are open and clear.



One way to achieve this was through increased communication between different partners and groups and bringing together organisations from many sectors of the community who initially had little contact with each other. Working together toward common goals can help organisations break down barriers and enable them to trust one another.



CONNECT, CELEBRATE AND CONNECT

Hold a celebration or a reflection event that extends to the entire community and determine how each group or partner can best contribute to broadening inclusivity and collaboration.



Advice and Guidance

Collaboration is not an easy process, the school noted that failure or success is determined by the interaction of three forces: time, 'turf' and trust.

- Time: it takes time and effort to develop a working partnership and while it may be tempting to attempt some projects without the help of other institutions or groups, in the long run, the collaboration will create better long-term results.
- Turf: collaboration works only when all partners both contribute to and benefit from the effort. When partners perceive an imbalance, imagined or real, tied to the benefits of the collaboration, the process of working together might stall, or the partner who feels disadvantaged might leave the collaboration.
- Trust: between all actors requires time and without trust between partners, initiatives have a high chance of falling apart – trust in others enables partners to share benefits and resources and to take on challenges they may not have done otherwise.



More information

-  [Sun Prairie Schools](#)
-  [Westside Elementary School, SPASD](#)
-  [@sunprairieschooldistrict](#)
-  [Sun Prairie Area School District](#)
-  <https://www.sunprairieschools.org/westside-home>

Learn more about their work by watching their event at 2022's T4 World Education Week: [watch here](#)

