

Kent County community schools removing barriers to learning

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By **Monica Scott** The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Sergio Cira-Reyes says some children have serious problems at home that can hinder their success in the classroom or make it difficult to even attend school.

Focusing on learning when there are issues of unmet physical and health needs, unstable housing, hunger, deportation concerns or domestic violence is challenging. For those students, so-called community schools that offer physical, social and mental services, can make all the difference in their academic success.

"Our number one goal is to improve academic achievement by removing obstacles to learning, letting the teacher focus on teaching," said

Cira-Reyes, a community schools coordinator at

Sibley elementary, where more than 90 percent of the students are on free or reduced lunch and the majority of students are Hispanic. "When things are going wrong at home, it creates anxiety for students that's noticeable in their behavior. We respond by providing as much support as possible to the family."

He said poor attendance can also be a red flag.

This school year Kent School Services Network, coordinated by Kent Intermediate School District, has 18 community schools (13 in Grand Rapids Public Schools) in six districts, up from the seven at then end of 2010. The initiative, created in a broad community-wide partnership, began in the 2006-07 school year as a three-year pilot.

Community School Coordinators work with a team of professionals on the school campus, including nurses, mental health specialists and Department of Human Services staff. But the community school is a huge web of partnerships between schools, families, foundations, businesses, faith-based groups and churches, and multiple service agencies and community resources.

Yolanda Posada, 28, said that support network has



Amanda Loman

Diana Parra, 5, receives a physical from physician assistant Kathleen Lindhout at the Burton Health Center on the Burton Middle School/Elementary School campus. The school is one of the Kent Social Services Network community schools, which provide health and human services.

COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT

Kent School Services Network brings health and human

made a huge difference for her family in what's been difficult year financially. She said the team at Sibley has been able to provide or guide her to the right resources such as resolving an electricity issue and assistance with her English.

"Since my daughter (5-year-old kindergartner) came to this school (Sibley), they have been helpful in many different ways," said Posada, who is married and has been unable to work due to her pregnancy. "I am a person of faith and I consider myself and family very blessed. The Lord has put people all around us to help."

Diana Sieger, president of the Grand Rapids Community Foundation which has contributed more than \$1.7 million to KSSN, said stories like Posada's are repeated across the area from KSSN parents.

"In my mind, it's (community school) a humane way of working with children and families," Sieger said.

Carol Paine-McGovern, director of KSSN, said the program just received a \$1.2 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation. The grant comes on the heels of the six-year, \$6 million federal grant received by its partner, Network 180, allowed the program to expand and provide mental health professionals in all schools.

She said they track attendance and achievement and all KSSN schools saw improved MEAP scores and met annual yearly progress in 2008-09. A 2009 report showed chronic absenteeism declined at all schools. In the elementary schools, over the past three school years, it dropped from 25.3 percent to 17 percent.

"We are helping to breakdown barriers students may have to learning, so teachers can teach and principals can lead," said Paine-McGovern. "We want to see student achievement improve so students are ready for

services into school buildings to serve students and families to remove barriers to learning. The concept is called "community school." This school year the program expanded to 18 schools in six school districts:

GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Coit Creative Arts Academy
- Alger Middle
- Sibley Elementary
- Harrison Park Elementary
- Gerald R. Ford Middle*
- The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Academy
- Campau Elementary*
- Cesar Chavez Elementary*
- Southwest Community Campus*
- Burton Elementary and Middle
- Union High**
- Ottawa High**
- Creston High**

CEDAR SPRINGS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Beech Elementary, Red Hawk 6th Grade and Middle8

GODFREY-LEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Lee Middle/High School and Visionquest Alternative*

GODWIN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- North Godwin Elementary*

WYOMING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Parkview Elementary*

KENTWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Freshmen Campus, East Kentwood High and Crossroads Alternative*

SOURCE: Kent School Services Network

* *Schools added to the network this year.*

** *Existing campus clinics now being served by mental health professionals through KSSN.*

college and career."

Jodi Pyper, Burton Health Center Manager, which is on the campus of Burton Elementary and Middle School, said the center, a KSSN partnership with Cherry Street Health Services, saw more than 700 kids for medical services and another 700-plus for dental services in 2010. Only certain community schools have health centers.

"All that care plays a part in keep them in school," said Pyper, who said the clinic also provides medical care to parents and community members. "It's great to be one of the many partners in the community working to keep kid's as healthy as possible, so they can learn."

The expansion to five more districts including, Cedar Springs and Godfrey-Lee has been welcomed. David Britten, superintendent of Godfrey-Lee, said their presence has made a "huge" difference and they've quickly become part of the culture.

"We are still not where we need to be because we have way too many children in the community who are not succeeding," said Paul Ippel, executive director of Network 180, the mental health authority for Kent County. "I think we have a structure in place now in which we are being much more immediate and responsive to problems, giving everyone hope and energy."

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