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## Joining Classroom and Community

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Dr. Carlos Azcoitia had been a teacher for nine years in the Chicago public schools when he decided to make a much-needed change. The Cuban-born educator launched the John Spry Community School and Community Links High School in 2003 to address the problems of his neighborhood. This unique educational model is designed to keep the largely Mexican population of the Little Village section of Chicago in school and to get them into college.

The Community Links High School accepts only 100 students, and this year's class of 28 will be the first to graduate from the new institution.

"A community school connects to families and to the greatest influence on the student, which is the family. It also connects to the greatest influence on the family, which is the community," Azcoitia explains. "To be able to sustain academic growth, you work with the school, the family, and the community."

While consistent problems such as high dropout rates and absenteeism are present in the Latino high school demographic, little change has been made on an institutional level, and these students often fall through America's educational cracks.

"Many of our students in the summer do not return to high school because they work to help their families. We serve an immigrant community with parents that work. They are large families. This is part of who they are." Forcing these families to conform to traditional school models has only resulted in lower education levels for the children. After five years as a principal, Azcoitia knew it was time for something new.

"This has been in the back of my mind for some time. I was a principal from 1990 to 1995, and I always knew that our work was incomplete if there was no continuity from eighth grade to high school. We are not changing the public school models fast enough." He proposed the community school concept to the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools and, luckily, got the green light.

"To recruit the first high school class, I met with the parents and with the community leaders," acknowledging that everyone in the community needed to be involved in order for these students to succeed in high school and continue to college.

"Our student body is 100 percent low-income, but we have so many assets in our community. We need to approach it in a different way. If

we don't change the high school model, we'll be effective to 50 to 60 percent, but what happens to the rest?"

In addition to the many revolutionary aspects of the Community Links High School, the school day is one of the most invigorating for traditional high school grads and probably one of the most attractive to eighth-graders looking toward next September. In Azcoitia's school, the day begins at 11:00 a.m. and ends at 7:00 p.m. Less compelling, perhaps, is the six-day school week and the lack of summers off. "We have a late start. Many student voices have indicated that high school starting at 7:00 a.m. is too early, and sometimes, they're late. It's the teenager's body clock."

Students start their day at the Boys and Girls Club next door with a physical education class. The bulk of the academic work begins at 3:00 p.m. Students often work as tutors in the John Spry Community School, their partner school that serves pre-K through eighth grade. The late start also allows students who need to help support their families work part time in the mornings. The late end offers parents the opportunity to finish their workday without worrying about day-care costs or, worse, leaving their children unattended on the streets.

#### Preparing for College

One of the most valuable assets for the students at Community Links is the college-preparatory work. Students begin visiting colleges in ninth grade. College Bridge is a program designed to acclimate first-generation students to college workload and college life. Community Links has partnered with Roosevelt University, National-Louis University, and DePaul University, where students attend classes at the colleges for dual credit for both high school and college. Community Links also offers sessions about financial aid for parents, many of whom are unfamiliar with the American education system and the financial aid process.

"We have parent classes. We teach ESL and GED courses in Spanish, and many of our parents have already been successful," Azcoitia attests. "We also teach a health class. We have a series of 'home gatherings,' where a parent opens his house to other parents from the block and one teacher. The first home gathering was about literacy and how it extends to the home. You develop relationships and trust so your education becomes more dependable."

While the high school might seem a godsend for many families, it is also a tough place.

"We are a no-failure high school. We expect 100 percent graduation. If you're not doing well, you have to come earlier, and the teachers give you tutoring. I touch base on a daily basis with any student that has been absent." And forget summer vacations. Students graduate high school in three years as the classes continue year-round.

When talking about the work in other schools in this area of Chicago, Azcoitia says, "This community suffers from a large dropout rate, and we're not changing the model. Many of our students in the summer do not return to high school because they work to help their families." To remedy this, Community Links offers no summers off. "In traditional high schools, if students are caught in a syndrome of failure, summer school is often used to make up failed classes. Our model allows students to attend school year-round and complete college entrance requirements in three years."

In the case of Wendy Patiño, a sophomore at Community Links, the three-year program was one of the most attractive features of the school. After attending two other high schools and being dissatisfied in the first eight weeks of her first year, the first-generation, Mexican-American decided that Community Links was the best match.

"One of the main reasons I wanted to go was because it's three years. I had lots of friends that were seniors in high school, and usually they went for half a day because they were done with their credits. Some of them felt it was a waste of time." Patiño was also' attracted to the opportunity to make some income while attending high school. "Also the stipends you get when you work--that was very appealing to me. The extra money," she giggles.

At 16, she is thinking about college and has already visited Illinois State University. "I'm interested in film. I know that maybe [New York University] would be good or the University of Southern California. Eventually, I want to try to work in Hollywood, so I'll have to move to California." With both parents having only a sixth-grade education, Patiño is a prime example of what a small, structured community school can offer.

While there might be many students who feel dedicated enough for this new model, the school is open only to those teens who live within walking distance of 2400 South Marshall Blvd. Preference for entrance to the small classes is given to graduates of the John Spry Community School. Each student applicant is interviewed, and so are the families. Vital to the success of the community school is family commitment and involvement.

#### America's Community School Movement

Azcoitia's brainchild is the only school of its kind in Chicago. The concept of a community school, however, is not new. The Washington, D.C., organization, Coalition for Community Schools, is a national advocate for these models, each of which is unique. For nearly 100 years, various states have created community schools. In its 2003 report, Making the Difference, the coalition cited the largest attributes of community schools, based on evaluations of 20 such schools across the United States.

Almost invariably, community schools improve student learning. Improved attendance, reduced discipline problems, and greater compliance with school rules and assignments are all hallmarks of community school models. The benefits to families were highlighted, including good communication with teachers, family ability to provide for children's basic needs, and parents' ability to meet work obligations, as well as increased attendance at school meetings. The report explains, "Because parents and partners work together with the school staff to support learning, community schools positively influence overall school operations."

Eduardo Jiménez is the lead teacher of the seven staff educators at Community Links High School (CLHS). Having worked for a number of years with Azcoitia, he was eager to join the new school's staff. Plus, having grown up in the neighborhood himself, Jimenez knows what to expect and how to work with the student population. He focuses on the course Work Experience and Career Explorations.

Prior to coming to CLHS, he taught at Farragut Career Academy, a traditional public secondary school. "When I was over there, it was much larger--close to 2,500 students. Here we have 100 students. There are 17 to 18 students per class, versus 32 to 35 students. That helps because it's more one-on-one, with two hours per class instead of 45 minutes. It's totally different from the traditional high school. Here the students are motivated, dedicated; they don't get lost in the piles. I have yet to come across a student who is here because they have to be here."

Jiménez notes that nearly 95 percent of the students are the first in their families to graduate from high school. By the time they graduate from Community Links, most of them already have six college credits. "They are all very bright students, and they all have a story to tell. It's all very interesting."

"We serve 100 students, and we know all of our families," Azcoitia adds. "The community is largely Mexican-American so we're also a point of entry' to many new families." Not only do students and their families benefit from the unique model community schools offer, but the community itself benefits from the workings of the school. Making the Difference reports "resources and benefits flow both ways. Community partners provide on-site supports and opportunities for students, their families, and neighbors. In turn, the school maintains an active presence as a community hub, providing opportunities for family involvement, tapping into the community as a resource for learning, and serving as a center for community problem solving."

Community Links High School collaborates with the Boys and Girls Club, Alivio Medical Center, **United Neighborhood Organization**, Chicago Children's Choir, and many more. As part of their daily curriculum and service learning, students work at these organizations.

"Schools cannot escape interdependence with outside factors that influence whether students learn. Schools must seize opportunities to connect, students and families to resources and support rather than lament the prevalence of outside negative influences. Connections with outside institutions reinforce a framework of effective educational accountability." Azcoitia explains that students at Community Links "share the work experience in the community at the local hospital, public library, or other internships."

#### Looking Ahead

As the first class of Community Links High School graduates this spring, Azcoitia, Jiménez, and the community will be looking for ways to improve their school. "We the teachers will tell you that the only difficulty we encounter is space. It makes it difficult for scheduling classes," Jiménez admits. "Many people think of us as thinking outside the box. We have a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club, and we use one of their classrooms now. We hope to use three there next year. It's going to grow to a campus atmosphere."

As she enters her junior year, Wendy Patiño had different hopes for Community Links. She sees a need for the school to grow in diversity--yet another step toward college preparedness. "Here we're all Hispanic, right? Most of us have parents who are Mexicans, and it's great. I feel at home because it's my culture. It worries me that people will get too comfortable with being with their 'kind.' College isn't going to be all Hispanic, even if that's the majority. I don't know how some students are going to deal with it, as far as the transition goes."

As the school physically and philosophically expands, more lucky students will benefit from the care and attention given to them at Community Links High School. Perhaps more U.S. cities will follow suit and craft appropriate community schools to help fulfill the ideal of sustained academic growth for every American student. Only time will tell.

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