

Why do so many schools have auditoriums? Why do they have athletic fields?

We take features like those for granted today, but there was a time when a school building with anything more than classrooms and chalkboards was considered wildly unorthodox. But, more than a hundred years ago, educators came to realize that schools can be more than simply places for instruction: they can be the center of their communities.

Indeed, classroom education is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to ensuring that all children succeed. The notion of building a future of opportunities for our children through community partnerships that give them and their families the tools they need to grow and thrive is at the heart of the full-service community schools movement.

Full-service community schools work with local organizations and the private sector to coordinate a wide range of services for students and families. At a full-service community school you might find health clinics or dental care, mental health counseling, English lessons for parents, adult courses, nutrition education, or career advice. For high-need communities that require social services, there is no more welcoming -- or efficient -- place to house them than in a public school. Schools like these quickly find a place at the heart of their communities, staying open long after school hours and on weekends, giving neighbors a place to come together and participate in the education of their children.

Here in Maryland, we have seen the success of such a model in our state's Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Family Education Centers, or "Judy Centers." The 24 Judy Centers throughout Maryland promote school readiness through collaboration among community-based agencies and organizations located within each Center. State evaluations of the Judy Centers have shown increased access to high-quality programs and services for low-income and special needs children and that they improve school readiness and minimize the "achievement gap" at the start of first grade.

A decade of research on full-service community schools has consistently shown that they promote higher student achievement and literacy, stronger discipline, better attendance and parental participation, a reduction in dropouts, and increased access to preventive health care (a factor that is especially urgent as we face a possible flu epidemic).

With these benefits in mind, Congress is considering legislation I have introduced that could

greatly expand the number of full-service community schools in America -- one of the most important pieces of school legislation in recent years. It would provide grants for states and school districts to work with community organizations and businesses to create the kind of programs that have had so much success at schools across America. Strengthening services in schools also has the potential to save our country money on everything from prison systems to emergency room visits.

A century ago, American educators re-imagined what a school could be; today, we have an opportunity to do the same. In fact, we have an obligation to -- because only by strengthening communities can we meet public education's mission of getting the most from every single child.

For more on Congressman Hoyer's Full-Service Community Schools Act of 2009, visit <http://democraticwhip.gov/docUploads/QAFSCS090909.pdf>

More information on Maryland's Judy Centers can be found at <http://www.mdk12.org/>