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Clearing the way for learning

Lincoln Middle School partners with agencies in a "community school" concept that helps kids cope with poverty, violence and other issues.

By ROBYN MEADOWS

Johnny Rios felt angry all the time.

"I would scream at my teachers," he says, "I was very disrespectful."

The former Lincoln Middle School eighth-grader is not like that anymore.

He learned to control his temper in an anger-management class at school.

The class was available to him because Lincoln, in Lancaster, is a community school.

Community schools are an old educational concept that is returning to schools across the nation and even the world.

That's because they work, educators say..

As a result, Lincoln's community school program has become a national model, and the city school district is launching Washington Elementary School as a community school this fall.

The idea is that schools establish partnerships with outside agencies that help children deal with issues that get in the way of learning — such as domestic violence, personal tragedy, mental illness and poverty.

Research has shown that children who grow up poor are more likely to drop out of school, become involved in crime and remain poor.

Lincoln's poverty rate is 78 percent, 4 percent higher than the entire School District of Lancaster.

Students at Lincoln deal with a bevy of problems before ever showing up at school. Some arrive hungry and without coats. Others are tired after hearing their parents fight all night.

"They can't learn if they are sitting in school with a toothache or mom and dad were up all night fighting," says Ivy Hawthorne, director of the community school. Many suffer with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

A community school eases those burdens with services such as referrals to health care, providing after-school activities, counseling, character education and anger management

They do this by establishing partnerships with outside agencies such as mental-health counselors, the YMCA and the Lancaster City Police Department.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington-based group that works to eliminate poverty, had approached the school district a few years ago about starting up a community school.

It works like this.

The Foundation donates money to an outside local group, in this case Community Action Program, a local nonprofit, to run the community school program for Lincoln.

Eisenhower has donated, in all, about \$241,000,

The Foundation doesn't just give money. It follows through with research that says community schools work.

Students who participate in activities have seen their self-esteem and grades rise.

The programs also have improved student attendance and relationships among classmates, according to Eisenhower's research.

It's changed Johnny Rios. He was angry because of a troubled home life, a life he keeps private. Since taking the anger-management class, his attitude toward school and himself has improved, he says.

Lincoln Principal Diane Fisher agrees with the research.

"It has made a huge impact," she says. "It's not just an impact with student attendance; it's an impact with families,"

Perhaps the biggest improvement has been parental involvement, says Martha DeAcosta, director of education and training for the foundation.

Parents gather for "Cafes." The school provides a light dinner and an informational session on issues such as state testing.

To eliminate the prospect of the evening becoming a total snooze fest, they also engage in a craft time with the principal and school officials, baking bread and making candles and plant holders.

"It creates a social climate where the principal is doing something that takes her away from the educator role," DeAcosta says. "She's putting her hands in the dirt like the other parents," Lincoln is in its fourth year as a community school.

The anger-management class has been a staple of the community school concept at Lincoln for three years.

At first, teachers recommended candidates for it, but soon "kids practically begged" to participate, Hawthorne says,

Rios signed up for all three years. He goes to McCaskey High School this fall.

Recently, Rios and the others in the anger-management class gathered to "celebrate" all that they had learned.

They told parents and teachers that in class they teamed to identify their anger, its roots and how to handle it.

To do so, they wrote poems and created collages. They demonstrated anger postures.

Eighth-grader Anthony Ford showed the audience if his anger had a sound, it would sound like, "BAM!" as he smashed his arms on a metal book shelf.

He had good reason to feel angry. His mother, Robin, died of cancer. He and his sisters, moved in with his aunt, Tanya Marshall, and her husband, Paul.

"When he first started (at Lincoln), he was getting in trouble," Paul Marshall says. "Now when he gets angry, he channels it and deals with it."

POSITIVE TRENDS AT LINCOLN MIDDLE SCHOOL

- *Increase in student attendance.*
- *Rising grades.*
- *Liking school more.*
- *Demonstrating healthier peer relationships.*
- *Improved self esteem.*