

Carlin Springs Community School

Background

In 2003, Carlin Springs Elementary School was selected as the pilot site for a “community school” approach in Arlington County by the Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families, an advisory group representing county agencies, the schools, and non-profit community organizations. Carlin Springs was selected for this pilot based on its strong track record for successfully engaging community partners to support student academics and family needs. Both the Arlington County Board and the Arlington School Board agreed to provide resources and support for the Community School.

The Carlin Springs Community School initiative has now completed its sixteenth year. Using the public school building as a hub, a community school offers a range of out-of-school-time academic, health, social, and emotional supports to students and their families through a host of community partners. Planning and implementation for the Carlin Springs Community School is in the hands of a steering committee of school and county staff, parents, community members, and partners.

Beginning in 2005, the school received 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) funds, which originally made it possible to support a full-time Community School Coordinator at the school. Based on strong evaluation outcomes year after year, the Arlington School Board voted in 2011-2012 to absorb the full salary of the Community School Coordinator into the APS budget. The success of the community school has attracted additional partnerships, allowing a significant increase in the number of after-school participants as well as health, mental health and skill-building supports for parent and families. Continued 21st CCLC funds have been invested in a half-time after-school program coordinator. The full-time Community School Coordinator maintains and expands community partnerships, coordinates the personnel and volunteers involved, and ensures that the community school activities reinforce the instructional goals of the teaching staff.

Extensive research about the Community School Model, and indeed the experience over the last twelve years at Carlin Springs, has shown that an integrated focus on academics, services, and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and a healthier community. In 2007, Carlin Springs Elementary was awarded the Community Schools National Award for Excellence by the Coalition for Community Schools. This recognition was based on our ability to fully integrate our school-day instructional program, our after-school programs, and our parent programs into a cohesive set of year-round opportunities to promote student achievement and stable, healthy families. This is accomplished with the full cooperation of our highly qualified school staff, and with the support of nearly 40 community partners, including Arlington County, local arts groups, the faith community, and businesses. Other support for the initiative comes from Title 1 funds and grants from local foundations, including the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families Foundation.

As a Community School with a solid infrastructure to maximize effective use of partners, Carlin Springs continues to be attractive to a sustained network of community partner organizations and individual community members offering resources to Carlin Springs families. School-based health and mental health services for the students and the families, offered through Arlington DHS and other community partners, are an important piece of the school’s success. Evaluation of the initiative over the past twelve years shows increased parent involvement and rising achievement among students.

Goal of the Community School: Increase Academic Achievement of our Students

This is accomplished through 4 objectives:

1. Increasing opportunities for after-school academic and social enrichments for students that complement and reinforce the curriculum
2. Increasing parents' participation in the school and interaction with staff
3. Increasing parents' skills in English, technology, literacy, and other skill-based areas
4. Increasing access to health, mental health and social services for Carlin Springs families

Evaluation Process

Extensive data on students in grades K-5 and their parents are analyzed by the Community School Coordinator, with technical support and guidance from Rebecca Hjelm, who is the Data Coordinator for the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families. The evaluation focuses on the relationship between students and parent participation in community school activities and student academic improvement, absenteeism and behavior. Data on program participation includes student participation in after-school enrichments and/or tutoring; and parent participation in content-related school events and parent workshops. Data to assess academic improvement include standardized test scores (SOLs and the DRA reading assessment) along with Arlington County math assessment; and teacher reported assessments of changes in performance in four key areas: class participation, behavior, homework and academics.

Data on both participation and academic outcomes are collected for all students in grades K-5 so that outcomes for those who participate in community school activities can be compared to those who do not. Data on parent participation in skill-building and family engagement activities and family health and mental health supports are also collected and analyzed for all students, grades K-5. Data for Pre K students is only included in the analysis of family engagement trends.

Results

Teacher surveys and standardized test results indicate that higher parent involvement and regular participation in after-school activities improve student academic performance. Absenteeism is lower among families whose children and parents are more involved in the community school programs. Families are being linked to needed health and mental health services offered through community partners.

After-school Enrichments and Tutoring

Carlin Springs offers nearly 30 different after-school enrichments and tutoring programs during the school year, often with higher participation rates in grades 3-5. The enrichments are designed to support what is learned during the school day in an interactive, hands-on way. Students who are at risk of failing the SOLs in grades 3-5 (based on previous year's scores) receive math or language arts tutoring, or both. Additionally, first and second graders who were below grade level on math or reading benchmarks in the fall receive tutoring. In grades 1-5, nearly 50 students attended the neighborhood-based Harvey Hall and Aspire! Afterschool Learning Centers. The Virginia Department of Education defines students who participate for 30 days or more in the 21st CCLC (after school) programs as "regular" participants. Each year, approximately 250 students participate in after school programming at either Carlin Springs, Harvey Hall or Aspire for 30 days or more.

High Impact Family Engagement

One of the top priorities of the community school leadership is to strengthen the home-school connection by making parents feel welcome and comfortable interacting with school staff. We employ creative outreach strategies such as back-to-school family picnics, home visits, and Coffee with the Principal events, and offer a variety of programs to strengthen parents' ability to support their children in their learning.

Parents Volunteers support the school. Over thirty attend on a weekly basis, many volunteer much more frequently. Efforts to build leadership skills by mentoring emerging parent leaders have shown positive results. We now have a core group of parents who are taking on more responsibilities for organizing events and fundraising.

A variety of activities are offered to strengthen parents' skills and increase their engagement in their child's education. The offerings are designed to be responsive to what parents identify as their top areas of interest in our bi-annual parent surveys. Here are some examples of ongoing programming:

Project Family is a program for parents and children learning together, including a parent education component for the parents and an early childhood experience for children ages 18 months up to 5 years of age. Parents who participate in Project Family report success in learning how to play with their child, the benefits of music and singing to their child's language development, and how to read and share books together. As of September 2017, the Carlin Springs Project Family Program is offered primarily at the Arlington Mill Community Center, located in the neighborhood where most families reside, making it more accessible.

Coffee with the Principal events are held quarterly; all sessions include education workshops for parents hosted by key school staff and community partners. Topics include interactive sessions about how to help your child academically by incorporating math and reading into bedtime routines. Each year, nearly 50 parents attend one or more coffee workshop sessions.

REEP (Arlington Education and Employment Program) provides Carlin Springs families intensive English classes at the Arlington Mill Community Center.

PARTICIPA! Is a 6-week leadership and skill-building program. Parents who participate, commit to 12 hours of programming over 6 weeks. This parent involvement and leadership course is designed for immigrant parents who want to deepen their understanding of how the American school system works to be able to navigate it effectively and strengthen their ability to support and advocate for their children's education.

Capital Area Food Bank Family Markets are a significant health and nutrition initiative launched in 2015. There are 10 distributions throughout the school year and an average of 75 Carlin Springs families come to the Family Markets to obtain free fresh produce each month. A total of 27,005 pounds of nutritious food was distributed last school year. Arlington County Parks and Recreation provides health and wellness activities for students during each market and the Master Food Volunteers provide healthy cooking demonstrations to families and hands-on children's cooking activities.

Strengthening Families is a 14-week family skill-building program where parents have an engaging opportunity to talk about family strengths and areas they would like to improve upon in the home environment. There is a parent and children's group that coincide each week offered in both English and

Spanish. The curriculum focuses on setting goals for the future, preventing early experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and improving communication at home between parents, adults and family members.

School-Based Family Resources

One of the key elements in a Community School model is to provide accessible supports to our students and families in the area of school-based health and mental health. Arlington County Department of Human Services (DHS) provides a full-time nurse and a mental health therapist (3 ½ days a week) as part of their commitment to the Community School. Maintaining these positions is essential as we work to address the basic physical, mental, social, and emotional needs of children and their families.

The DHS school-based positions represent best practice in a holistic client and community-centered approach and allows for the flexibility needed to connect with students and parents beyond the school day – through home visitation, after-school appointments with parents, and meeting with Extended Day and other after school and staff. Many of the families would not otherwise access these important services.

Some Carlin Springs students suffer from difficulties with attachment, depression, anxiety, and emotional regulation, all of which significantly impair their ability for learning in the classroom. A number of the children have been re-unified with their parents in Arlington after years of separation – which presents a complex set of emotional stressors for the child and the family. These students' emotional and behavioral challenges require ongoing interventions involving both students and their families.

The DHS school-based mental health therapist works with our families and staff to provide; community awareness; prevention programs; assessments; individual and family therapy; consultation; and behavior management planning. As a DHS employee in the building, this role also serves as a liaison for Carlin Springs families to community services. Areas for referrals include housing, ESL classes, food, furniture, parenting education, domestic violence services; coordination with other DHS units (such as CPS and foster care); acculturation/education for families on law enforcement expectations; collaboration with courts; immigration-related support; special education services; and family reunification.

A full time DHS nurse manages medical, dental, hearing, vision and other health referrals; linking uninsured families with insurance programs; providing health education opportunities to students and families; and coordinating the monthly family produce markets. The onsite DHS nurse uses a family perspective, and provides follow-through and resolution of family health challenges. The DHS nurse serves as a case manager with parents, staff and health providers, keeping school staff and after-school program staff connected and informed about student health needs. This role includes provision of classroom health education, and coordination of several initiatives that allow students to have successful and positive experiences with healthcare professionals.

Medical and dental referrals are initiated for students with significant medical or dental issues that require follow-up by clinic staff to ensure evaluation and/or treatment are received. Referrals require contact with parents/guardians and occasionally with providers, follow-up to ensure completion, and/or contact with teachers to update them on referral outcomes.

Carlin Springs teachers report great appreciation for these DHS positions, noting that the on-site collaboration with mental health and health staff results in students who are more ready to learn and families that are healthier and stable.

Conclusion

Our annual evaluation finds that the Carlin Springs Community School Model helps increase academic achievement in language arts and math, decreases absences, increases parent involvement, and effectively connects families to health, mental health and other school resources.

Students are motivated and engaged in learning all day with well-integrated in-school and after-school learning experiences. The physical, mental and emotional needs of children and their families are being addressed through on-site partnerships and linkages to other community resources. There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families and school staff. There is support for parent engagement at home and school. Community engagement promotes a school climate that connects students to caring adults and a broader learning community outside of the school.

Given the results of our evaluation, the Carlin Springs school funds have been directed to support the Community School Model. It is critical for APS to continue to budget for the full-time Coordinator position and to support the remediation, enrichments and parent programs, all of which align with the school system's strategic plan goals of addressing the whole child, eliminating the achievement gap, engaging all students, providing optimal learning environments, and retaining quality staff. Demand for after-school participation, parent and family programs, and on-site health, mental health, and recreational resources at Carlin Springs continues to grow, and there are waiting lists for all these programs.