

Expansion of Community Schools Benefits Idaho Children & Families

By
Blue Cross of Idaho,
Foundation for Health, Inc.

The Idaho Coalition for Community Schools recently awarded implementation grants to 10 school districts to help them launch or bolster their community school efforts to better serve children and families.

Community Schools are neighborhood public schools that bring together families, school staff, community members, and community-based organizations to support students with needed resources and opportunities. The Idaho Coalition for Community Schools (ICCS) consists of schools, government entities, and nonprofit organizations, including the Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health. ICCS was launched and is administered by the United Way of Treasure Valley.

The latest round of grant recipients are American Falls School District, Washington Elementary (Caldwell School District), Emmett School District, Garden Valley School District, Genesee School District, Marsing School District, Middleton School District, Parma School District, Salmon River School District and Wilder School District. These grants were made possible by organizations who contribute to a shared fund. The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health, Idaho Children's Trust Fund, State Department of Education, Idaho Community Foundation, St. Luke's, United Way of the Treasure Valley, and the United Way of South Central Idaho all contributed to the fund.

This is the second round of implementation grants that ICCS has awarded. Among the first cohort of grant recipients were the Cascade School District and Harwood Elementary School in Rigby, which is part of Jefferson County School District 251. The implementation grants allowed them to hire coordinators, full-time staff members embedded in the school to assess, plan, and coordinate the elements of Community Schools Strategy.

SUCCESS STORIES IN IDAHO

Both the Cascade School District and Harwood Elementary had been providing services normally associated with community schools before receiving grants from ICCS. Each received Community Schools planning grants before the implementation grants, which gave them access to training provided by the National Center for Community Schools. These best-practice workshops and coaching helped each better serve their students and families.

"The training that has been provided through the Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation and the coalition has really been invaluable," Harwood Elementary Don Fryberger said. "You can't put a dollar figure on the training that we've received, because that has really helped us focus in on the important pieces of the work that maybe we would've been missing otherwise."

For Cascade School District Superintendent Joni Stevenson, the training and grants reinforced that her district was on the right track. It already offered preschool, after-school programs, and a few other programs before it began the community schools training.

"I started to realize that most of these things are Community Schools Strategy," she said. "I think being in a small school, we are the heart of the community, and oftentimes the place where people come, families come, kids come when they need something. Once we were introduced to the more robust picture of Community Schools Strategy is when we started to see how much some of the major components can really fit into our setting and just complement what we're already doing."

ULTIMATE FORM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

One reason Community Schools Strategy is becoming more commonplace in Idaho is the principle that every community school is unique and is based upon what each community wants and needs from the school. Each community school does this through engagement with students, parents, and the community.

"I think the key to a successful community school is making sure that we do everything we can to engage the community and gather feedback from the people in our school," Fryberger said. "We do an annual needs assessment, and we survey the parents and kids in our school to try to determine what they think they need, and what they value out of education. The goal of a community school is to figure out what needs the community has and what desires they have, and then we try to meet those needs through our education system."

The coordinator role is essential in organizing and arranging what services, programs and resources are provided at the community school.

"Our intended goal is to figure out what do the kids want, what do the families need, and how do we build our school community from that?" said Josh Hurley, Dean of Students and Community Schools Coordinator for the Cascade School District. "How do we increase that capacity to be able to pour into that family unit so that it'll help them with their education, and overall health, and mental health? We've been able to build a lot of community partnerships."

Tera Andrews attended Harwood Elementary, and her children also spent their elementary years at the school. She was hired as the Community Schools Coordinator last year, allowing her to give back to a place she loves.

"For me, it's come full circle. Rigby is a community I love, and I'm proud to be a part of it," she said. "The community school benefits the entire family, the overall wellbeing of a student, not just their academic career. The overall feeling of being accepted, of being loved, of being cared for, and taken care of, by your entire community, not just your school. There are people outside of school who care and want to help. We serve as the hub for that help."

SETTING THE EXAMPLE

Harwood's program hasn't gone unnoticed in Eastern Idaho, where community schools are new to the region. Fryberger said Community Schools Strategy should catch on because it promotes making necessary resources available to kids and families. He knows this from his school's community engagement and what he's heard from others.

"It's been fun to see other schools in the area start adopting some of the same strategies, because the parents are going to those administrators and saying, 'Hey, can we do such and such, like Harwood Elementary is doing?'" Fryberger said. "And then before you know it, there are several other schools in our area who have afterschool programs, other schools have food pantries. They're adopting the community school strategy without knowing it, because their parents see what we are doing here at Harwood, and then say, 'This is a good thing. Why can't we do this at our school?'"

The ICCS is helping schools and school districts across Idaho learn more about Community Schools Strategy, then helping them implement if the school or district decides it is the right fit for them. For Hurley, the Cascade School District coordinator who previously worked as a state police officer and a pastor, Community Schools Strategy makes sense.

"I think that's the goal of the Idaho Constitution when it says every child shall have a free and fair public education," he said. "It starts with that ability to understand that we need to make sure that when kids show up, that they have that ability to dive into that, that they have the ability to get focused in the classroom. To me, community schools is really the mechanism that you use to get that done."

Schools or districts interested in learning more about Community Schools Strategy can learn more by visiting the ICCS website at idahocoalitionforcommunityschools.org or by contacting Hayley Regan, Collaborations Manager, at hregan@unitedwaytv.org or Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health Senior Program Officer Jackie Yarbrough at jarbrough@bcidaho.com.



The Idaho Coalition for Community Schools presented in May at the National Community Schools and Family Engagement Conference in Philadelphia. Representing the coalition were Hayley Regan (United Way of Treasure Valley), Jill Matthews (State Department of Education) and Jackie Yarbrough (Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health). The "Growing Statewide Relationships to Support Strategic Work" presentation was well-attended, and it showcased the collaboration in Idaho surrounding Community Schools Strategy.



IN
IDAHO,
FOR
IDAHO.