So well-chronicled are the challenges faced by schools in large urban and metropolitan areas that a lay person may perceive the nation’s rural and small-city schools as bucolic settings where educators don’t have a care in the world other than keeping the occasional cow from wandering onto the playground during recess.

The reality, of course, is that each community has its own challenges. And although some call upon a few of the larger urban school systems to simply trim their bloated bureaucracies as a cure-all for what ails them, what would those same critics have the smaller cities do? In many cases, those systems have little fat to trim and fewer places from which to draw resources because of their limited tax bases, lack of corporate support, or state funding formulas. Still, rural and small-city schools must often face many of the same challenges as their larger brethren, such as poverty; low education levels; large English language learner, transient, and special education student populations; and substance abuse among students.

Logan Middle School in La Crosse, WI, is in many ways a typical small-city school facing some of these challenges. What sets it apart is the extent to which the school has developed programs to build relationships between students and teachers, between students and their learning, and between school and home. These relationships are vital to personalizing the school environment.

Jump Start
Getting each student off to a great start in middle school is the goal of Jump Start, a weeklong program for incoming sixth-grade students. Held at the end of each summer, the program allows students to learn the daily routine of middle school. To allay the all-too-common bewilderment students experience in a new school, Logan has established interactive activities during which students become familiar with the school building, the lunch system, and the locations of various programs. In addition to reviewing their math, science, reading, and social studies skills in preparation for the school year, students get to know their classmates and teachers in team-building activities. The final day of the week is a “fun day” that includes time at a pool and a scavenger hunt that requires students to know the school’s layout.

To ensure that the teachers and the students aren’t the only ones who get to know
one another and have fun, the administrative offices are one of the stops on the final day’s schoolwide scavenger hunt. The principal also kicks off the program with a welcome message and program overview and participates in team-building activities, the academic skills review classes, and the pool party. By the end of the week, the students have had several opportunities to interact formally or informally with the principal—all before the first day of school. The school community views the Jump Start program as a great way to start creating good results in reading and math and building supportive relationships and expectations. After the first week of school, the teachers are surveyed about students’ attitudes, confidence, and preparedness. The surveys have shown that the program calms fears, dispels myths, and answers many questions for the students.

Seventy-five percent of incoming sixth-grade students—and 90% of identified students—participate in Jump Start. This success is due to the efforts of staff members who visit the various feeder schools at the end of the school year and encourage students to participate in Jump Start next fall. An additional effort is made to identify students who may have a high level of anxiety about starting middle school. Those students and their families receive phone calls and home visits to encourage them to participate.

From the Bridge Builders Grant Application

Located in the city of La Crosse (pop. 52,000), in the far southwest corner of Wisconsin, Logan Middle School is 1 of 14 schools in the La Crosse District. According to the school, the city’s comparatively small population translates into limited resources to overcome the many challenges the city faces, including poverty, low education levels, and substance abuse. La Crosse has always been a primarily blue-collar community, although the students’ socioeconomic backgrounds vary greatly from the very rich to very poor. Located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city (more than one-third of families with children under 18 live below the poverty level), the school has a high-poverty and ethnically diverse student population; more than 25% of students receive special education services; 25% of students are from minority races. (La Crosse is also home to more than 3,300 Hmong refugees.) Because many students struggle academically as well as socially, the school has extended-day programming and services and unique programs to build student-teacher and school-home relationships.

Maintaining the Momentum

At Logan, staff members are expected to be proactive in their quest to meet student needs well after the opening bell of the school year. Teachers and other staff members believe that after-school programs are one venue through which they can reach and engage students, and as a result, they developed a host of activities that students can participate in, including enrichment programs and homework clubs. More than 60% of students regularly (defined as at least 30 times a year) attend after-school activities. In a site visit by Bridge Builders project
analysts, every student the analysts spoke with talked about how the activities made them feel a part of the school. Students were extremely enthusiastic about the programs and reported that the activities have provided access and opportunity to things that may not have otherwise been possible; broadened their views about career possibilities; and in the case of the Homework Club, resulted in academic improvement.

After-school activities, including hobby-type programs (e.g., robotics, woodworking, community service class, and knitting), allow staff members to get to know students outside of the classroom and allow the students to see their teachers’ talents. Staff members point to these programs as a key reason for greater respect between students and teachers and an improved learning atmosphere during the school day. This sentiment is supported by a survey of schools that indicates that students who have had at least three teachers who have made a difference in their lives are more likely than others to be interested in their classes, to feel safe at school, to value higher education and to say their opinion counts at school. (Markow & Martin, 2005, p. 4)

According to Logan’s grant application, the after-school program has several goals, including:

- To “provide safe, healthy activities...for 15+ hours per week before or after school that address school/neighborhood needs, reinforce and complement the school day, and enhance relationships between school staff and students.”
- To include 50% of students (and 75% of identified students) in one or more enrichment programs each week
- To have 40% of staff members teach one or more enrichment classes during the year
- To increase by 20% the number of student participants coming to school prepared to learn and with their homework completed.

Although the after-school programs are open to all students, it sometimes takes some aggressive outreach to reach high levels of participation from various groups. Some strategies in place at Logan include:

- Staff members recruit students who are struggling academically or socially
- Staff members meet with identified students during resource time and make home visits or calls to families
- Identified students are linked with college-age mentors for support
- Afternoon announcements always include program offerings
- The principal encourages the participation of students who have academic and behavioral problems.

**Home and Community Support**

One of Logan’s parent and community outreach objectives is to “provide parent education and family programming that result in a more educated community, increased parent involvement, a better understanding of students’ educational needs, and improved family relationships with the school.” To that end, they sponsor a parenting speaker series and multicultural family nights.

**The Parenting Speaker Series**

The parenting speaker series has been very well attended and has had standing-room-only crowds (more than 1,000 parents attended one night). A free dinner is served and childcare is provided during these presentations. Topics have included Home Agenda–School Agenda: A Necessary Partnership; Raising Strong Kids in Tough Times; and The Dangerous Side of the Internet.

Interest in the speaker series is generated in the following ways:

- Speakers present their information to the student body during the school day
- The school provides childcare during the presentations
- The principal promotes each presentation in automated phone messages that are sent to every family and makes announcements about the presentations in morning news shows, radio programs, and newspaper interviews
- The principal collects topics of interest
through an online survey, suggestions from the parent-teacher organization, and so forth.

Multicultural Family Nights
During the multicultural family nights, families from various minority groups get the opportunity to learn more about the school’s programs in a less-intimidating environment. For example, the Hmong Family Night includes information about after-school and cocurricular programs and resources, an academic awards ceremony for Hmong students, a traditional Hmong meal, and the opportunity to ask questions of and interact with staff members informally. The African American Family Night includes a panel discussion on district resources and services; an academic awards ceremony for Black students; and a dinner and celebration of Black history that includes student presentations, songs, and a performance by the African Drum Ensemble.

Almost 100% of Logan’s minority students participate in these events. Students are involved in the planning, promotion, performances, meal preparation, and awards ceremony. These events have proven to be invaluable opportunities for the principal to connect with families, answer questions, dispel myths, and impress upon parents the importance of their involvement with their children’s school.

Thoughts to Share
The educators at Logan have some advice for other educators who want to replicate their success:

- Effective outreach for parent and community support requires that the principal recognizes and makes the most of staff leadership.
- Schools must market themselves and tell their stories.
- Principals must ask for the help they need.
- Activities must be presented as mutually beneficial and purposeful for the students, families, staff, and the community.

REFERENCE


Homework Clubs

Various homework clubs are available to students either before school (Sunrise Club meets 6:55–7:25 a.m.) or after school. Each grade and the English language learners’ class has a homework club room.

Students who need help with homework or a place to study can go to these locations and receive tutoring from teachers, teacher assistants, and tutors from the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse and other community sponsors.

Afternoon club times (2:25–3:30 p.m.) do not conflict with other after-school enrichment programs, which do not begin until 3:45.

A nutritious snack is offered after Homework Club.

Paying Dividends

According to teacher surveys and other data analysis, the homework and math clubs have helped:

- 80% of participants improve their classroom academic performance and approximately 25% of participants improve their reading and math grades by one or more letter grades.
- A similar percentage of participants improved their homework completion rates.
- 91% of math club participants improve attentiveness during math class.

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