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## Complementary Learning in Action

### The SUN Service System

Claire Brown Goss, Consultant  
Suzanne Bouffard, Project Manager

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For questions or comments about this paper,  
email [hfrp\\_pubs@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu)

**About this series:** As complementary learning takes root across the country, *Complementary Learning in Action* shares innovative examples and lessons learned from those initiatives. This series documents the ways that diverse cities, counties, and states are employing complementary learning approaches to serve children across ages and across settings. It highlights key themes and emerging strategies to help build knowledge and inform others in the field.

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Harvard Family Research Project · Harvard Graduate School of Education · 3 Garden Street · Cambridge, MA · 02138  
[www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org) · Email: [hfrp\\_pubs@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu) · Tel: 617-495-9108 · Fax: 617-495-8594

## The SUN Service System

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On a typical day at a SUN Community School in Multnomah County, Oregon, the school opens early, providing students with a safe place to do homework or participate in optional skill-building activities. From late morning through early afternoon, the site manager, who coordinates nonacademic and wrap-around services, identifies student-specific needs and supports, meets with school and partner staff, and interacts with parents. The day does not end at 3 p.m.; rather, the extended day program offers a variety of academic support, mentoring, and enrichment activities, along with rejuvenating snacks and dinner. In the evening, the school opens its doors to adult community members, offering empowerment/skill-building activities that are facilitated by community members and supporters from local businesses. Year-round, families can find health and social services within the community school. The name of this comprehensive approach—Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN)—captures the collaborative spirit of a community-wide initiative to educate and support youth and families in a seamless way.

### **What is *complementary learning*?**

Across the country, there is growing recognition that even high-performing schools cannot do it alone. National discussions reflect the need for additional supports to help bridge the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. In this setting, Harvard Family Research Project is leading the national conversation about complementary learning—the idea that systems that intentionally link nonschool supports with each other and with schools can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed.

Complementary learning is taking root in many forms across the country. Some initiatives link two or three supports for children and youth, while others create comprehensive systems. As these initiatives develop, HFRP is learning from their innovations and sharing strategies, challenges, and insights with others in the field.

SUN Community Schools are part of the larger SUN Service System, a unique county–city–school partnership designed to align resources and promote success for all children, youth, and families in Multnomah County. SUN is an antipoverty and prevention effort that connects educational, social, health, and other services under one umbrella. SUN leaders view education not as an end itself, but as a pathway to positive development and self-sufficiency. As part of this vision, they see schools as community centers that play a vital role in the health and success of both individual youth and the community as a whole.

## History: A Foundation of Collaboration

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The SUN model of combining educational, social, and health supports is rooted in a strong history of community involvement and partnerships in Multnomah County. For decades, Multnomah County and the City of Portland each had an independent history of collaborating with local schools to serve children and families. The county’s system offered health and social services (including school-based case managers, resource centers, and health clinics), while the City Parks and Recreation Bureau’s program focused on before and after school recreational activities. These initiatives coexisted but were not aligned and, in some ways, duplicated efforts.

In the late 1990s, both city and county leaders began to think about how they could more effectively and efficiently support education in their communities. In 1998, under the leadership of City Councilman Jim Francesconi, County Commissioner Dianne Linn, and County Chair Beverly Stein, the city and the county decided to coordinate their efforts and work together to support educational and life success in Multnomah County. SUN leaders explain that this was “the right time and the right place . . . it was the right conversation with the right people in the room.” Supportive leaders on both city and county sides, some of whom had a background in community activism and all of whom had a longstanding commitment to education and partnership, laid the groundwork for the collaboration, working closely with schools, districts and community-based organizations. In 1999, eight full-service SUN Community Schools began.

In 2001, Multnomah’s Board of County Commissioners appointed a task force to more formally inventory all county services for school-age children and families in order to identify overlap, improve coordination, maximize funding, improve data collection and outcomes, and, ultimately, to develop a policy direction. As a result of this multiyear process, the task force created a guiding School Age Policy Framework and folded all services for children and families into one county-wide initiative. This initiative, which became known as the SUN Service System, built on the county’s existing SUN Community Schools.

Through this reorganization, implemented in March 2004, the County shifted to an increased focus on school-based service delivery. Although a handful of regional community centers continue to provide services, most services are delivered through 54 SUN Community Schools. SUN Schools serve as community hubs, serving people of all ages and providing comprehensive supports in one location. This aligned system now coordinates a variety of supports, such as housing and energy assistance; homelessness prevention services; mental health and health services; library services; and early childhood programs. Some of these supports are provided by county

### **Snapshot: SUN Service System**

*Location*

Multnomah County, Oregon, including the Cities of Portland and Gresham, and 8 school districts

*Start date*

System start date: 2001  
Community Schools start date: 1999

*Types of partners*

County services (social, health and mental health), City parks and recreation, local school districts, nonprofits, community agencies, businesses.

*Mission statement*

To provide social and support services to youth, individuals and families that lead to educational success and self-sufficiency.

*Website*

<http://www.co.multnomah.or.us/dscp>  
<http://www.sunschools.org>

“[It was] the right time and the right place...it was the right conversation with the right people in the room.”

— Diana Hall, Program Supervisor  
SUN Community Schools &  
SUN Service System

departments, others by city departments, and still others by the school districts. However, these lines are invisible to families; they see one seamless system of supports and services.

Each SUN Community School has a community lead agency to manage nonacademic services. This lead agency, with the help of the school principal, selects a SUN site manager who is responsible for building networks of services, classes, and volunteers. The site manager and school principal work in close collaboration to ensure alignment of services with the school day. Site managers help each school design programs that are responsive to community needs, while ensuring coordination with the other SUN schools across the county. A Site Partners Team (representing all the entities in the school that work with the students) and a Site Advisory Body (with broad representation from the school, youth, families and community) ensure community-driven efforts and service integration.

From its inception, the SUN Service System has been designed to maximize resources. Funding for SUN comes from the county's and city's existing budgets for schools, health and social services, and recreation. Funding that was previously allocated for separate services has been blended into one budget for the SUN Service System. The county, which has a long history of providing health, social, and justice services, manages and distributes state and federal money designated for select child and family programs, excluding TANF and child welfare programs. Largely, the SUN Service System's work has not utilized any new sources of funding.

## **Building Connections: Constant Communication and Committed Champions**

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Establishing a shared mission and goals has been critical to the SUN effort, especially because of the large number of partners and the complex structure. For example, staff members are employed by many different entities: Some community school site managers are employed by nonprofits, while others are employed by the city. Functioning in one seamless network requires that all staff—from the leadership at the top to the line staff—see themselves as part of one effort.

Facilitating this complex set of partnerships between the city, the county, the schools, community nonprofits, and others can be challenging. The backbone of this collaboration is constant communication. At each level of the system, from the county commissioners to the individual schools, institutionalized processes and structures facilitate communication in order to share information and improve coordination. The SUN Service System Coordinating Council, which was formed in the spring of 2007, is a prime example. The Council is responsible for hearing voices from all parts of the system, and is charged with guiding and governing the system including allocating resources, developing a funding strategy, establishing best practices, and sharing standards, among other tasks. Members of the Coordinating Council include high-level representatives from the county, the City of Portland, the State Department of Human Services, local school districts, local nonprofit organizations, and businesses, as well as a youth representative.

Communication is just as important at the site level. Two city-level and county-level program managers facilitate regular meetings among site managers and line staff and coordinate ongoing

professional development. In addition, bidirectional communication between the sites and the school districts is built into the structure of the SUN Service System. District representatives facilitate a feedback loop that works in both directions: partners bring information and issues to district representatives, who then communicate with superintendents and also attend monthly meetings of the SUN School Districts Council. This midlevel communication system has been critical to addressing barriers and ensuring that information flows in both directions.

Just as internal dialogue is important, communication with external stakeholders builds visibility and sustainability. The SUN Service System has cultivated relationships with key supporters from across the community. Relationships with elected leadership have been critical, and SUN leaders have worked to ensure that their efforts will not be adversely affected by turnover in political leadership. For example, when a new mayor, superintendent, or other official is elected or appointed, staff meet with him or her to explain SUN's benefits to the community and to discuss visions for the future. Staff also schedule site visits to give officials opportunities to see the system in action.

“You’ve got to keep championing to find the common ground...everyone has interest in successfully coordinating services for kids and communities’.”

— *Lorenzo Poe, Coordinating Council Chair & Senior Policy Advisor to the County Chair*

The value of engaging champions became clear in 2006, when a change in county leadership occurred and SUN was threatened with a \$2 million budget cut. City and state-level leaders advocated for the community schools, and over 500 students marched against the budget cuts during a County Board meeting. Although the budget cuts were implemented, pressure from community champions helped persuade the county to later reinstate a sizable portion of the funding. The overwhelming support from the community and elected officials led several contenders for county chair seats to adopt an “I am for SUN Community Schools” platform.

Results of SUN evaluations have been important for engaging supporters and ensuring sustainability. Data collection measures include state test score gains and attendance rates, as well as teacher and student surveys. Recent results show that 70% of students are reaching or exceeding benchmarks in reading and math, average daily school attendance is 95%, and 93% of students report having at least one adult who cares about them or to whom they can go for help. SUN shows its commitment to evaluation by employing an internal evaluator, who oversees all data collection, analysis, and use for continuous improvement.

## Looking Forward: Going to Scale

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The number of SUN Community Schools has grown rapidly in recent years. Starting with just eight schools in 1999, the initiative grew to 18 schools by 2002, and with the inception of the School-Age Policy Framework in 2004, the number rose to 46. Currently, there are 54 SUN Community Schools in eight school districts across the county. In the long term, the county

“This is a long-term investment, versus short-term interventions.”

— *Joanne Fuller, Director, Department of County Human Services*

envisions going to scale so that all 150-plus schools in Multnomah County will become SUN Schools. As the SUN efforts move to scale, leaders and staff will continue to face certain challenges. As with many programs, one issue will be sustaining and securing funding and resources. The SUN System has an added complication of working within both city and county budgets, which can lead to red tape and challenges in appropriating finances.

As its efforts move forward, SUN will likely continue to face questions from some politicians and community members about appropriate roles for all of the partners. For example, county leaders have questioned why they are providing educational services, which are typically the responsibility of school districts. SUN staff answer that the county's role is one of "facilitating a system" to prevent children and families from becoming users of more traditional—and often more expensive—county services such as the justice and correctional systems. Both the services and the goal are bigger than education. They are about life success.

Creating and maintaining this complex system of services has taken years of planning, learning, negotiating, and adapting. SUN leaders stress that the system was not created overnight and that it has taken a strong commitment to partnership at every level, from the county commissioners, to the site managers, to the school janitors. Communication both creates and sustains all such partnerships. As the initiative grows, ongoing communication will be central to promoting the well being of Multnomah County's children and families.