

Wolfe Street Academy Baltimore, MD



Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore has moved from the 77th to the 2nd highest performing elementary school in Baltimore since adopting the community schools strategy nine years ago. Because of the strategy, students have greater access to after-school learning opportunities through ExpandedED, student mobility has decreased from 46.6-8.8% in eight years, and average daily attendance is 96%.

Demographics	Results
<p>Location: Baltimore, MD Grade levels: Pre-K – 5 Number of Students: 219 Race/Ethnicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American 8% • Asian American 2% • Caucasian 11% • Hispanic 79% <p>ELL Students: 63% Special Education: 13% Free/Reduced Lunch: 96%</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student mobility has decreased from 46.6% in 2006 to 8.8% in 2014. • 5th grade reading proficiency has increased from 50% in 2006 to 95% in 2014. • WSA has moved academically from the 77th to the 2nd most successful elementary school in Baltimore City • Average daily attendance is 96%, with only a 1% chronic absence rate • WSA currently serves 84% of K-5 students until 5:40 PM • WSA reduced suspensions to 0 students over the past four years

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Wolfe Street Academy

Community and University Partnerships Contribute to Family Stability and Student Success

Working toward the goal of ensuring that all students are reading on grade level is a challenge for most schools—even more so without a functioning school library.

That's the problem Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore was facing until its community partners stepped in to give students the opportunities they needed to access and enjoy library materials.

The school had received a grant for “reading room” materials in 2007. Without a librarian to organize the books and work with teachers to connect them to the curriculum, however, the materials were largely unused, says Connie Phelps, Wolfe Street's community school coordinator and part of the community school efforts at the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) School of Social Work.

That all changed about a year ago when a member of the Upper Fells Point Improvement Association (UFPIA)—a partner of the school—stepped in to offer her expertise. Mollie Fein, a retired public librarian, began working with a social work intern to catalog the materials, create a lending library and run a book club to get students further engaged in reading. The partnership didn't stop there. UFPIA's Youth and Education Committee is raising funds for additional reference materials for the library.

“I feel passionate about wanting to see better libraries in city schools,” says Fein, adding that not only are students benefitting from having greater access to books, but the neighborhood is also being impacted by the Wolfe Street's success. “When I moved here, there were basically no children on our block. Now families are staying. Everyone is aware that Wolfe Street Academy is moving up.”

The changes Fein sees in her neighborhood are showing up in the school's data as well. Since Wolfe Street became a community school in 2006, the student mobility rate has declined from 46.6 percent to 8.8 percent. Phelps attributes the drop to increased test scores, improved services and “all the other supports provided by a community school.”

“Because families are looking for supportive communities,” she says, “they find Wolfe Street Academy attractive.”

Fein and other partners also participate on the School-Family Council, which includes school administrators, Phelps, parents, teachers and community members. This group

meets monthly to discuss school goals. Teachers lead subcommittees of the council in order to strengthen the connections between the work of the partners and the classroom and to communicate needs that are standing in the way of students' learning.

Special education teacher Katrina Kickbush made these connections clear earlier this year when she spoke before House Democrats considering changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. "We see how the effects of poverty can hinder a student's success in the classroom," she said. "But we also know that community schools, as an innovative reform model, can help support students, families and schools."

Increasing Extended Learning Opportunities

Developing creative solutions to meet the needs of students and families are what community schools are all about, and Wolfe Street Academy has become a strong example of how a community school structure can create an environment that leads to student success.

One of Baltimore's original community schools, Wolfe Street Academy has benefitted from having the same principal and coordinator—and many of the same partners—since its beginning as a community school. The school converted to a charter school, as part of the Baltimore Curriculum Project, seven years ago, so that it could continue to implement its research-based curriculum as other schools in the district changed theirs. As a conversion charter school, the school continues to be a zone-based public school. Any child living in the geographic zone can enroll at any time during the school year.

"This journey of great people, using great academic programs, supported by the great community school strategy has allowed Wolfe Street Academy to move from its 2005 ranking as the 77th highest performing to its 2014 ranking as the 2nd highest performing elementary school in the district," says Principal Christopher Gaither.

One reason for Wolfe Street's academic gains is because students now have greater access to after-school learning opportunities through ExpandedED, a network of schools in Baltimore, New Orleans and mostly New York City, that provide expanded learning and enrichment opportunities that are closely linked to the academic skills teachers focus on during the school day.

"In order to experience everything that we had to offer, it became more necessary for children to be in the after-school program," Phelps says. The school used to have a long waiting list of students for the after-school program. But now 83 percent of the school's kindergarten through 5th grade students participate in extended learning opportunities, which include homework help, sports, music and a science program. The school also hired a full-time out-of-school time director to oversee the alignment of both after-school and summer programs with learning goals for students.

Johanna Galat, who has just finished her first year as a master's in social work student at UMB, not only helped with the library project, but also helped lead an after-school anti-bullying group focused on educating students about different disabilities. The sessions were developed in partnership with classroom teachers who felt it was an area that needed attention. She said working in a school has been valuable experience and helped her gain a better understanding of the pressures on children of immigrants to "assimilate quickly."

With expanded learning programs running until 5:40 p.m., 85 percent of the school's students are now able to receive three meals a day at the school. Families also have access to a food bank, meeting the needs of parents who work service industry jobs in the evening. "Eating three meals a day at the school also helps to alleviate food scarcity issues at home, saving very poor families the cost of groceries," Phelps says.

University Partnerships

The library project is just one demonstration of how university students are providing support and services to the students and families at Wolfe Street Academy. Social work interns gain field experience and provide help in multiple ways, including case management, referring families to other services and taking on special projects at the school.

The School of Dentistry provides annual screening exams for all students, provides an after-school session on oral hygiene and healthy eating, and refers parents to pediatric dentists if needed. Since the partnership began in 2008, the number of students needing follow-up treatment has declined by 75 percent.

Students also receive one-on-one tutoring at Wolfe Street during the after school program from Johns Hopkins University and at Notre Dame of Maryland University students. Roughly 40 students are paired up with a tutor for the entire school year. The tutors collaborate with teachers so they know what to focus on during the sessions, and get to know the students well, Phelps says. "It really becomes tutoring and mentoring," she says.

Raising Attendance Through Community

Wolfe Street's morning meeting—held while students are eating breakfast—is a routine that starts off every school day in a positive direction and gives parents a chance to feel part of the community. About 40 parents stay for the meeting every morning after bringing their children to school.

As the Baltimore elementary school with the highest percentage of Hispanic children, Wolfe Street makes sure all communication to families and presentations are in both

English and Spanish—even its Facebook page. The school recently started receiving families from Mexico who speak an indigenous language called Mixtec, so the school plans to offer Mixtec translation at school events. The school’s elected parent group now has six officers and holds bilingual meetings so Spanish-speaking parents can participate. The School-Family Council meeting is also bilingual.

The growing relationships with parents, combined with the support the social work interns are able to provide, is also contributing to higher attendance rates. This past February, the school had a chronic absentee rate of 1 percent, compared to 3.3 percent for other charter schools.

“As a teacher in a community school, I know that site coordinators, and the trust that they build with students and families, along with the partnerships with community organizations, are essential to provide students with the full range of opportunities and supports they need and deserve,” Kickbush told the members of Congress. “Schools cannot do it alone; they need strong community partnerships, public-private partnerships, to give students the level of education they need for the 21st-century workforce, and to give our nation the strength of a well-prepared and highly successful generation.”