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Palatine Dist. 15 plans to make junior high a community "hub"



Palatine Township Elementary School District 15 wants to make Winston Junior High a hub for families and students when it comes to after-school classes for parents, health services and student mentoring.

Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer

A junior high school in Palatine with growing numbers of low-income students is being prepared to become a "community school," to help expand resources for those students and their families.

Officials in Palatine Township Elementary District 15 have chosen Winston Junior High as their first attempt at a community school, a concept for improving student achievement that is gaining ground nationwide.

The community school concept recognizes that low-income families have different needs, and more challenges than other families -- challenges that can get in the way of student learning.

Over the next several years, school officials expect Winston to evolve into a community hub as well as a school, getting

parents and the wider community involved, and tackling issues that low-income students often bring to school with them -- a lack of proper nutrition and stable housing, lack of needed help with homework, language barriers, lack of health screenings and more.

Rene Carranza, District 15's principal on special assignment, said that at a community school, resources are brought directly to the school -- a place that most parents can easily access -- making it a one-stop shop for families who often face transportation and economic barriers in getting resources they and their children need to thrive.

In 2014, 68 percent of Winston Junior High's students came from low-income families. That compares with 42 percent districtwide, and 52 percent statewide.

Winston's low-income population has been growing steadily since 2010 when it was 52 percent. The percentage of minority students also has gone up, from 61 percent in 2010 to 71 percent in 2014.

"The community school is really seen as a hub of the community where we can make sure kids are ready for school, provide more resources for parents and strengthen families," said Cheryl Wolfel, director of second language programs in District 15.

Those services, Carranza said, could initially include conversational English and computer classes for parents and extra homework help and mentorship for students.

While much of the homework help and mentoring can be led by volunteers, Wolfel said, Winston Junior High also plans to partner with Harper College and the Palatine Park District for English and computer classes they hope to offer.

Getting families into activities and classes in the school building, especially at the junior high, helps keep parents involved in their children's education, Carranza said. And that helps keep students on track.

"The idea is to create a welcoming atmosphere for parents," he said. "A lot of times parents disengage in the upper grades."

The district, along with the [Palatine Opportunity Center \(http://palatineopportunitycenter.org/\)](http://palatineopportunitycenter.org/), applied for and received a \$75,000 grant from the United Way to help fund the program's initial costs. And after the grant's two-year funding cycle is up, District 15 and the center can apply for another one.

Carranza said their focus now is hiring a bilingual site facilitator to help determine what the community's needs are and how the district can work with existing programs to meet those needs.

About half the grant will pay for the facilitator's salary, Carranza says.

Eventually, the school could offer health care, social work and mental health resources.

Melissa Mitchell, the executive director for the [Federation for Community Schools \(http://www.ilcommunityschools.org/\)](http://www.ilcommunityschools.org/), says building a community school often takes a few years.

Once a school district starts planning a community school, the federation offers professional development coaching to the district and its site facilitator. The federation also puts school districts new to community schooling in touch with each other.

"It really is a developing process," Mitchell said. "It takes time to look at what the needs and assets are. And it's also about building off what's already happening."

Wolfel said District 15 officials visited an Evanston community school, and attended a 21st century Community School Conference.

Mitchell said offering resources can ensure students get the help they need from school, a familiar place where they already are coming.

"A lot of kids are coming to the classroom with challenges that impede their learning," she said. "But with a community school, families are able to access supports that can be accessed at the school at different times of the day."

Currently, many low-income families in Palatine use the Palatine Opportunity Center for help with health care, recreation programs and educational resources.

Expanding the resources already offered during the day at the center into the evenings at the school could help reach more parents, Carranza says.

The classes and extra homework help would be offered from 4-7 p.m., and wouldn't interfere with the regular school day or extracurricular activities, Winston Principal Matt Warren said.

Winston Junior High would like to hire high school students to help mentor and coach younger kids while their parents are in language classes or another program. This would also give former Winston Junior High students the chance to give back.

Warren expects that eventually the school will serve not just Winston families, but the entire District 15 community.

"I'm hoping this invites more families into our school," Warren said, "including families that maybe aren't even current students, but are coming to Winston later."

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