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## This Community School Meets the Needs of Students and Families

Using the community school model, Lincoln Middle School has been able to help remove barriers and alleviate family issues that make it difficult, or even impossible, for some students to succeed in school.

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by Ivy Hawthorne

Lincoln Community Middle School is located on the outskirts of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. One of 21 schools within the Lancaster school district, it stands on a hill in a hub of district buildings that includes a high school and the district's administrative offices. Two elementary schools and a second high school are within a few blocks. A nearby church offers free hot chocolate and morning treats to students on their way to school and the principal and administrators greet students outside as they arrive each day. Any student who arrives early may go to the cafeteria for a free, nutritious breakfast.

Walking down the halls before, during, and after school hours, a visitor will see adults who are not conventional public middle school staff. These are largely nonschool district personnel and they are key employees in the community school. Officer Mike, the school resource officer, is a full-time police officer who helps build community relationships with students, families, and the police. The community school director and the extended-day specialist have their doors open for all and are busy with new and current programs for students, parents, and families. A mental health counselor is available to any Lincoln student and family member regardless of income or insurance, and a bilingual student family liaison is available to assist with social services and other student and family issues. These supportive staff members and extra hands make for an accessible school and a good student and community environment.

### **A Community with Challenges**

More than 80 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, so poverty is an issue for many Lincoln families. Student uniforms are required and can be a financial challenge. Mobility runs high. Last year's turnover rate was above 46 percent, and higher movement is anticipated for this school year. Recent community gang and homicide activity has made it crucial for Lincoln to make an aggressive effort to provide violence prevention information and programs.

Many middle school students care for their younger siblings because their parents' demanding work schedules do not allow time off. Although not recorded, a large number of students have incarcerated family members. By using the community school model, Lincoln has been able to help remove some of these barriers and alleviate family issues that make it difficult, or even impossible, for some students to succeed in school.

The community school began at Lincoln in the 2002-2003 school year with a grant from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation to hire a community school coordinator. In the ensuing years, with continued support from the Eisenhower Foundation, the school district, the Community Action Program of Lancaster, and many other community partners, Lincoln has continued to provide a successful community school initiative. Finances and methods to sustain the project are reviewed and evaluated on an ongoing basis. By combining and using the appropriate funding pools and grant provisions, Lincoln has been able to retain and grow programs despite challenging funding situations.

The lead agency of the community school, the Community Action Program of Lancaster, and the Spanish American Civic Association, which employs the student family liaison, are two of Lancaster's major social service agencies. Lincoln families are provided quick access to needed services such as food, housing, child care, employment and education assistance, and

many other family services. In addition, donations and a local church provide uniforms and warm coats to students in need.

**The After-School Program**

Statistics verify that the hours between 3 and 6 p.m. are the most dangerous for students. The after-school program offered at Lincoln and the feeder elementary schools helps to relieve parents and community members of that concern. The aggressive after-school program provides a nutritious snack, academic tutoring, homework assistance, and an array of quality enrichment activities.

Students who receive academic tutoring are tested and tutored in math and communication arts in order to achieve proficiency as measured by state standardized tests. In addition to mentoring and leadership clubs, students are able to participate in activities such as karate, boxing, dance, and gymnastics. Community partners, teachers, and volunteers facilitate the various clubs. Family members are always welcome to join these activities.

Due to the high mobility within the district, the middle school academic curriculum is consistent throughout the district, and three of the four middle schools have an after-school program that is similar to the one at Lincoln. Students also participate in functions that involve multiple middle schools. The intent is to enable students to feel more comfortable moving throughout the district and getting to know other students.

Various student mentoring and leadership groups assist the school in dealing with violence and gangs. Boy's Group, Young Marines, People Effectively Assisting Kids to Succeed, Concerned Black Men, and anger management groups all have been great assets to students. A new student peer-mentoring program was added this year and has proved quite successful as well.

These programs have been spotlighted on local television programs and in various newspaper articles. Such accolades are important because they increase community awareness of the initiatives and create a climate of school pride.

**Parental and Community Involvement Are Key**

In order to boost parental involvement, the staff initiated various activities to encourage parents to come to the school and to help them develop a sense of ownership. The Lincoln Parent Café event has been a staple at the school since 2004. It includes a light dinner, presentation based on parental requests, and activity. Child care is provided by the student leadership team.

Parents have participated in sessions as varied as state testing standards and salsa dance lessons. Dinners, honor roll celebrations, picnics, and parent workshops also have made it possible for families and community members to come together for educational, enrichment, and social activities.

To ensure quality programming, rigorous evaluations are performed annually by outside evaluators. Included in these assessments are student surveys, parent surveys, site visits, and grade, attendance, and discipline data analyses. Parents have remarked that their children now enjoy learning, have better behavior, and have learned to communicate with other people. Evaluators have noted, "Positive trends at Lincoln Middle School include an increase in student attendance, rising grades, liking school more, demonstrating healthier peer relationships, and improved self-esteem." Supportive parental feedback, combined with evaluator's comments, underline the positive impact of the program's efforts.

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