

Connecting dots

FROM FOOD AND COUNSELING TO CLOTHES AND MENTORING, ONE SCHOOL OFFERS SERVICES THAT BUILD THE FOUNDATION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS.

By Mary Ellen Flannery

One student was orphaned during the summer after freshman year, and relies on the school's food pantry and clothes closet. Another struggles with math, and wouldn't graduate without a lunchtime tutor. A third is a first-generation American—a brilliant student in her advanced classes, but stressed out and stretched thin.

All of them cherish the support they have found in the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center at Marietta High School in Marietta, Ga.

There, a network of teachers, counselors, and community partners have, since 2015, cultivated a culture of hope and achievement. Last year, more than half of the high school's 2,500 students spent at least some time in the center—for services that range from academic tutoring, grief counseling, and anger management, to college advice, and substance abuse counseling.

Their parents might also have dropped by to do a load of laundry.

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the center's director, Rona Roberts. More accurately, Marietta's success

center could be described as "a concept, a mindset, a changing paradigm" that sees students as more than test scores or data points on a graduation rate, but as whole people and community members with complex needs.

It is the future of public education, she hopes.

Last year, by a vote of 60 percent, Georgia voters rejected a proposal by Republican Gov. Nathan Deal that would have allowed the state to seize control of struggling public schools, fire their principals and teachers, and bring in for-profit charter school companies to run them with local tax dollars.

Their resounding "No, thank you!" was a vote of confidence in

A common thread runs through students' descriptions of Marietta's Success Center. This is a place where they have connected the dots—to mentors, counselors, academic tutors, and other professionals—from the 34 community agencies that have partnered with Marietta High. "All of these people here, they've shown me that they care," says C.J., a sophomore.



"Last year, I found a place where I could really be open, where I could calm down and focus."
— QUINCY, SENIOR



"Coming to a place like the Success Center gives you some space to figure out who you are—and you're not alone in figuring it out."
— CARRINGTON, SENIOR



Above: The rack of men's suits in the success center's clothing closet can be borrowed by students—or their parents—for job interviews, court dates, or other occasions requiring business attire, says program director, Rona Roberts (left). Nearby, an intern from CobbWorks is sorting through donated toiletries. Right: One of the success center's seniors tells local union president, Connie Jackson (right) that she got her prom dress out of the closet—a pale pink sequined number with a feather train.



The clothing closet includes baby onesies, toddler-size overalls, and more. These are useful for teen parents, but also younger siblings. Below: The food pantry provides more than 8,000 pounds of donated food each month, ranging from baby formula to frozen beef patties. But some of the most popular donated items are feminine products.



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— RONA ROBERTS, DIRECTOR, MARIETTA SUCCESS CENTER

the school-improvement strategy that was championed by countless parents and Georgia Association of Educators members. It’s a plan that has worked in public schools across the nation. What is it? Investing in locally run, community schools.

What is a community school?

“[Community] schools are first and foremost places of learning, but what sets them apart is their focus on the entire child,” explains NEA President Lily Eskelsen García in a recent blog post.

“Common sense tells us that students can’t focus inside the classroom if their basic needs aren’t met outside the classroom. That’s the premise of community schools.”

In Brooklyn Center, Minn., this means the high school has a person

who helps parents find affordable housing. In Allentown, Pa., it means the local food bank packs take-home meals for students every Friday, the local symphony helps with music classes, and the region’s mobile dental clinic books appointments through the school nurse.

The services provided by community schools aren’t all the same. They differ according to a specific community’s needs. But almost all are characterized by long hours, open-door policies, partnerships with dozens of community agencies, and the realization that strong communities can help students learn.

This is a proven fact: “When public schools become community hubs—offering services and programs beyond the school day, creating strong learning cultures and

safe and supportive environments for students and educators—student outcomes improve,” according to Annenberg Institute for School Reform researchers.

State takeovers, on the other hand, like in Louisiana and Michigan, mostly have turned high-poverty schools into low-performing, racially segregated charter schools.

In Marietta, success looks like this: A student who has graduated from anger management counseling says a cheery “good morning” to her mentor. Or another, sitting in a computer lab long after classes have ended and darkness has fallen, enjoys the quiet space to get his homework done.

“This is home away from home,” he says. 🌈



Left, the Good Vibes Café, which was funded with a \$120,000 donation from a local Kiwanis Club, is decorated with student paintings. During lunch, students relax here. After school, a culinary arts club cooks up a storm.