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A ‘Wraparound’ System of Care for Schools.

Several school systems are implementing so-called wraparound programs in an effort to help troubled kids, families and communities.

If you’ve spent any time following education policy these days, you probably know that Common Core Standards are the topic du jour. Depending on political leanings, people either love them or hate them. But even the most brilliant, focused and politically embraceable education reform initiative will fail if kids flat out aren’t ready to learn when they show up at school each day because they’re not getting what they need at home.

The importance of supporting potentially troubled kids in school was a key part of an interesting panel conversation on education reform held last month during *Governing’s* annual Outlook in the States & Localities conference in Washington, D.C. The panel featured Roy Romer, former governor of Colorado; Randy Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers; and Elaine Weiss, head of the Economic Policy Institute’s Broader Bolder Approach to Education initiative, which is aimed at moving the educational debate beyond didactics and to the ground-level realities of the well-being of kids and families.

As everyone on the panel pointed out, kids who [show up at school hungry](#), tired, scared or in poor health — and whose home lives might be in shambles — aren’t going to learn very well, regardless of the core course work or the quality of the teachers. Making matters worse, there’s a good chance that these kids will be flat out disruptive in school, compounding the problem.

Fortunately, there are some school districts that are tackling this problem: In Cincinnati, the district has fully embraced the concept of “wraparound schools,” or schools that house a variety of support services aimed at getting kids everything from food to health care to counseling in order to ensure that all students are ready to pay attention and perform in the classroom.

But true wraparound schools are much more than that, says Weiss of the Economic Policy Institute. As a first step, she says, wraparound schools certainly do look at the “opportunity gaps” that exist for some students, whether it’s as basic as getting them a backpacks to carry around school work and supplies, or as complicated as ensuring they get decent dental care. But the best wraparound programs are those that involve families and whole communities in looking out for the complete health and well-being of students and their families.

“A lot of educators complain that they can’t engage parents,” says Weiss. “So you have schools that are open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and teachers say they can’t get parents involved? Well, maybe that’s because the parents are working.” As a solution, Weiss points to wraparound schools that have a coffee and meeting room for parents who walk their kids to school, along with schools that have evening hours so that working parents have a chance to engage.

Good wraparound programs go even further. A lot of parents in many school districts never graduated from high school or don’t speak English, so some wraparound programs offer English and

high school equivalency classes. “Some are even offering things like tax preparation clinics in the evening,” says Weiss.

Ultimately, it’s all about engagement and coordination. Schools that are serious about the wraparound movement actually have dedicated staff who do nothing but coordinate parent and community involvement, social and health services, and the day-to-day learning environment. So while the educational world may at presently consumed by the debate over Common Core Standards, several schools are addressing the real building block to learning: Ensuring kids are healthy and secure.

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