

Battleground for Our Schools

Powerful Results When God's People Pray

By Cheryl Sacks



I still remember the first time I heard about what was really happening in our Arizona schools. I didn't know that teachers used their own money to buy students essential clothing like underwear, or that schools didn't have the resources to maintain buildings. I had no idea that teachers gave out canned goods on Fridays so that kids could eat over the weekend.

I didn't know about the number of students who were homeless, struggling academically, overdosing on drugs, or attempting to take their own lives. Even the churches right next door to these schools knew nothing about what was going on inside those walls!

So when four young men—Mike, Matt, Jon, and Keith—showed up at our ministry offices to ask if we would help them with an initiative to pray inside the schools of Arizona, I knew it was a God assignment!

We all heard the Lord say the same thing: Invite My

transforming presence into the schools.

A Strategy of Hope

We began meeting with the principals of targeted schools. One of the first things we did when meeting with principals was to ask forgiveness for not taking time to find out the needs of their school. We said we were sorry for not praying and doing what we could to meet their school's tangible needs. Then we asked them how we could pray for their schools.

I remember sitting in the office of one principal and asking him, "What is the biggest problem your school faces?"

He broke down in tears. "That's an easy question to answer," he said. "There's no hope here!"

We knew God wanted to change this!

So we rented school auditoriums and prayed and worshiped in 26-hour prayer vigils in schools all across the state. I'll be the first to admit, this was a stretch. We struggled to step out in faith to raise the money to rent the auditoriums—and then labor all night in intercession every weekend that fall!

With broken hearts we cried out to God for food for the students, more teachers, money for repairs of the buildings, new sports equipment, and better test scores. In the midnight hours we worshiped and contended together against suicide, depression, and despair.

And then the reports came rolling in:

- **At Mingus High**, about one to three students a month were overdosing on Oxytocin. The school, ranked in the bottom 25 percent academically, was on probation from the Arizona Department of Education.

Just following our 26 hours of on-site prayer, the police came to the school and conducted a routine drug search. For

the first time in anyone's memory, they found nothing! Three months later after another search, still no drugs. And we're so grateful to the Lord that in the four years since that time, there have been no more overdoses. Mingus High no longer ranks toward the bottom academically. Within one year, they moved to the top 25 percent (in 2012), and they also received an A-plus ranking from the Arizona Department of Education in 2014 and 2015. The principal, who had not been enthusiastic about our prayer event on campus, afterwards told our team, "I still don't believe in prayer. But I know results when I see them. I'd write a letter to any principal in Arizona recommending this event take place in their school."

- **At Peoria High School** the academic scores improved so much after we held a prayer vigil that the vice principal called us back to ask if we would host 40 days of prayer and fasting before students took their AIMS aptitude tests. We did, and Peoria has continued to improve in their academic rankings. In fact, the following year in 2012 U.S. News and World Report listed Peoria High School among the top schools nationally and internationally—and they have received that ranking each year since!

We also solicited donations directly for Peoria High School, and we took the vice principal shopping to buy sweatshirts, underwear, and socks for the students. Nearby churches supplied school supplies and toiletries. Then we presented these gifts to the school on the opening night of the prayer vigil.

- **At Manzo Elementary School** we prayed for 12 hours during the spring of the school year. At the time Manzo was ranked an F school, graded according to students' test scores. The school board had talked about shutting down the school and firing the principal. We prayed specifically about students improving in their academic scores.

By the end of that academic year, the school had improved to a C-plus ranking. When the Tucson Unified School District statistician called the principal, he asked, "How did you do this? No school moves up 22 points in one semester. It's statistically impossible!"

As you might guess, Manzo Elementary School remained open, and the principal was not fired. In fact, he was given a promotion.

- **At Central High School** facilities were run down, the sports fields and landscaping badly needed refurbishing, and the school couldn't afford to hire an adequate number of teachers. The general atmosphere in the school was depressive. Fights broke out daily among students.

Shortly after we started praying specifically for these needs, the Arizona Cardinals NFL team got wind of the desperate needs of the school. They donated cleats, jerseys, pads, and other gear they could no longer use. NBA Cares Foundation heard about the school's plight and provided \$150,000 worth of furnishings, extensive landscaping, and general maintenance, including refurbishing the school's sports fields. Phoenix Suns Charities came to fix up the campus and gave the principal a check for \$200,000 to hire additional teachers.

That fall Central reported no fights on campus. One teacher posted on Facebook, "The entire atmosphere of our school has changed!"

Most Desperate Need

The problems we discovered are not unique to Arizona. Most schools face similar issues.

Beyond the physical and financial needs—and they are great—our schools desperately need the healing power of Jesus. No wonder it seems hopeless. Secular institutions can't solve a

spiritual and moral crisis or give kids what they need most: an encounter with the Lord.

The good news is, we've seen what God can do. Miracles happen when we invite His transforming presence into our schools!

We know of teens who, after coming to our prayer gathering at their school, changed their minds about killing themselves. At least two of them had planned to take their own lives at school that very night. Instead they heard the worship, came inside, and ended up giving their lives to the Lord.

When stories of what God was doing in schools got out, things began to change. The eyes of the community were opened. The Holy Spirit awakened the Church.

Now families and churches are getting involved in adopting schools for prayer and practical service everywhere across the state. They are providing backpacks, food, tutors, and mentors. In one school, at the request of the principal, we created a Serve, Watch, and Pray program. About 80 members of a nearby church signed up to serve as volunteers on campus, and we trained them how to "watch and pray" on the job.

Ways to Connect

There are so many ways to connect with a school in your community. Here are a few ideas:

Adopt a school: Build intentional relationships with your neighborhood schools. Ask, "How may we serve you?" Then take their answers to your church body or family for prayer and action. The power of united, fervent, focused prayer aimed at our local schools, along with building long-term relationships with school officials, will open doors to meet tangible needs that can result in powerful transformation.

Host a prayer vigil: Meet with the school principal and discuss how you can rent the school auditorium to host a

prayer vigil. Ask him or her to tell you the school's specific needs and promise to pray for these during the event. Discuss the length of time you will need access to the building and ask about any restrictions. We schedule 12 to 26 hours because we've found that the spiritual atmosphere changes when we stay long enough to saturate the school in worship and allow our hearts to be broken over the needs there. We always invite principals, and often they are willing to let students and faculty know about the event.

Mobilize a prayerwalk: You may want to do something like we do in Arizona by mobilizing a 21-day back-to-school prayerwalk. Individuals, families, and church groups prayerwalk schools in their neighborhood or the school they or their children attend. During this time, some churches invite teachers and administrators in their community to a weekend service where the church honors and prays over the educators before the new school year begins.

We always see powerful results from our back-to-school prayer. One year right after our school prayerwalk, a woman was walking near the school her church had adopted in prayer when she noticed that two strange cars in the parking lot were crammed with people, the car doors flung open. Sensing something was terribly wrong, she ran into the school and alerted the principal. He locked down the building just seconds before angry men stormed the front door.

Every Prayer Counts

You may not be a church leader or have the time or connections to launch a major prayer initiative. What can you do? Grab a prayer partner and go for a prayerwalk around a school. If you have school-age children or grandchildren, pray with them about their school during a mealtime or before bed. When you are dropping off or picking up your child at school, arrive early and pray over the students and teachers you see—and anything else God puts on your heart.

Here are some vital issues for which every school needs prayer:

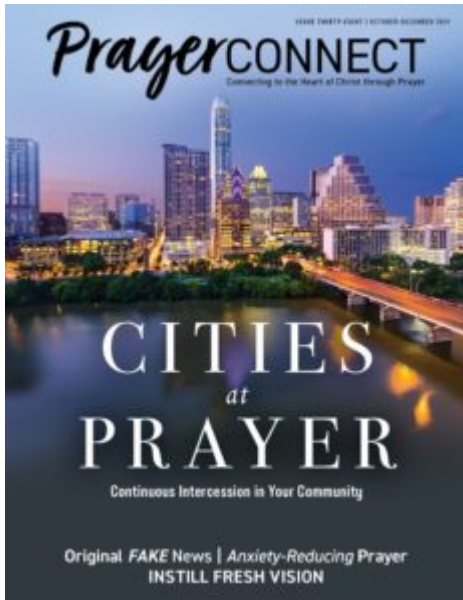
- **Protection from evil:** Pray Psalm 91 over the school and ask the Lord to station His angels all around. Ask God for protection not only from shootings and violence but also from bullying, drugs, gangs, and evil spirits that come to steal, kill, and destroy (see John 10:10).
- **Overcoming hopelessness:** Declare, in Jesus' name, that all thoughts of suicide, depression, hopelessness, and despair are broken off (see Jer. 29:11). Pray with expectation and confidence that students will experience salvation and the joy that comes from knowing Him.
- **Prospering in school:** Ask the Lord to place each student with the teachers and classrooms where that particular student will prosper. Ask Him to send godly influences to the young people to encourage them in their studies and their walk with Jesus Christ.
- **Contending for purpose and destiny:** Ask God to raise up young people with godly purpose and destiny to contend for righteousness and justice at their schools (Amos 5:24) because our schools are gates of cultural influence in our nation. Ask Him to raise up those who, like David, will fulfill the purpose of God in their generation.

There may be principals, teachers, and students in your community who feel there is no hope. But we know the answer that can result when the Church comes together and seeks God for His blessing and transformation in our schools. We just need to take the initiative.

For free school prayer guides and more information about mobilizing school prayer in your community go to bridgebuilders.net/resources/free-materials.

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prayer. She is a national speaker and best-selling author of the Prayer Saturated book series: *The Prayer Saturated Church*, *Prayer Saturated Kids* (co-authored with Arlyn Lawrence), and her newest book, *The Prayer Saturated Family: How to Change the Atmosphere in Your Home through Prayer* (available at prayershop.org).



This article appeared in *Prayer Connect* magazine, a quarterly publication of the Church Prayer Leaders Network, Harvest Prayer Ministries, America's National Prayer Committee and the Denominational Prayer Leaders Network.

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