A Primer for a School's Participation in the Development of Its Local Community

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Background

In September 1987, the Chicago Innovations Forum convened a meeting involving 20 people interested in local community development. Half the participants were from local neighborhood organizations and community economic development groups. The other half were principals and administrators of local public, parochial and private schools.

The group was asked to focus on practical ideas for a school's participation in the development of its local community.

Schools as Community Partners

The following document records the ideas of those 20 people who asked how a new partnership could be created by schools becoming active in the revitalization of community life. This Primer is a summary of those ideas. It is not our purpose to advocate their particular ideas. There are hundreds of other possibilities. Instead, the ideas are a Primer, designed to start a new discussion between school and community leaders.

We encourage the readers to create a school-community task force in their neighborhood or town. The group — comprised of students, public officials, teachers, civic leaders, administrators, business people, board of education members, and clergy — can create its own contract for a new partnership focused on renewal of both the school and the community.

School Projects Investing in Community Development

The following list of 31 projects is a beginning effort to give concrete examples of how a new partnership between schools and communities might be implemented.

Students and Teachers

1. Identify the key assets of the community (businesses, associations, clubs, facilities, etc.) and create a guidebook for community development. The local Chamber of Commerce or service clubs may cooperate in its publication and dissemination. This initial work can educate students and teachers about their community while initiating a cooperative working relationship with community groups.

2. In cooperation with interested community groups, create community history projects that will enhance commitments to the future. These could be done with senior citizens, ethnic associations, historical societies. The completed work could be published in local newspapers.

3. Working with local development groups, research information that will facilitate community planning, i.e., inventory vacant lots, identify land ownership, map capital improvement plans, identify economic development groups, update census data on local demographics.

4. In collaboration with local neighborhood organizations, development or business associations, conduct local attitude and consumer market surveys. These could be conducted door-to-door or by telephone.

5. Conduct research on the choices involved in community issues and convene community forums in the school to discuss the issues based upon the background research prepared and presented by students.

6. Most neighborhood organizations in larger urban neighborhoods need to learn about developments at the block level and channel information to the block residents. Local students could become "area reporters" for the two or three blocks where they reside, acting as liaison between the neighbors and their associations. This civic information function could be the basis for course work on the nature and practice of democracy.

7. The community development process requires local media to involve residents in planning, notify them of action, and celebrate the local progress. The students, in cooperation with local groups, could create a newspaper serving these functions in areas too small to be served by other media.

8. In cooperation with local government units, students could engage in public service by conducting studies and performing functions with local units of government. They could do air quality monitoring, assist public health officials in surveying toxic sources, conduct traffic control studies, etc.

9. In cooperation with local business associations, students could do studies of consumer attitudes and preferences as well as reports on the proposals and ideas of local business people regarding improving economic opportunity. They could also develop proposals for closer links between the school and local employers.

10. Students could become direct participants in development activities such as housing construction and rehabilitation, where they could develop skills and contribute to the development process.

11. Many churches are involved in running community projects such as tutoring programs, sports, services to the elderly, preschool child care, etc. They usually depend upon community volunteers. Students could become volunteer workers, developing skills for future employment in the service sector while building the community's capacity to meet local needs.

12. Many nonprofit organizations involved in the community development process could use the capacities of students. They could work with the office support staff in connection with a curriculum in office management. They could assist in tracking housing in violation of codes and study the process of enforcement.

13. Every community has organizations involving senior citizens. There are innumerable ways for students to cooperate with these groups and their members. All of the projects described above could be conducted in cooperation with individual senior citizens or groups. Intergenerational housing developments could be jointly studied and planned by students and seniors. Students could develop a matching service connecting students and seniors to provide mutual support, i.e., daily phone checks to see that seniors are all right, etc.

14. In cooperation with local artists or an arts council, students could create outdoor murals to beautify the local environment.

15. As major users of the parks, students could study the history of community parks, survey local residents' use and desires, sample students' use and desires, and develop a neighborhood plan for park development and improvement.

16. As part of a curriculum focused on energy issues, students could develop an energy efficiency program for their school with the savings placed in a fund to capitalize new venture development by students.

17. Students could conduct a study of crime and vandalism in the neighborhood by using data provided by the police force. They could also survey community attitudes toward crime. Based upon this information, they could develop a proposal for crime reduction, seek student participation, and seek local governmental and community support.

Teachers

18. As specially trained and skilled professionals, teachers have a great deal to contribute to groups involved in community development. They could develop a school inventory of the skills and expertise they have to offer. This inventory of capacities could be made into a teacher skills directory and distributed to local community development groups seeking technical advice and assistance. Subsequent requests for assistance could also be the basis for involving students in apprentice-like learning experiences with their teachers.

19. Most community development groups have boards of directors representing diverse interests in the community. Administrators and teachers could indicate a commitment to serve on the boards, contributing their knowledge and identifying opportunities for school participation in organizational development projects.

Courses

20. A special course in business accounting could be developed for local small business people. Similarly, a course on local community development enrolling both students and local adults could be created.

21. Special courses to help people earn credentials, such as the test on General Educational Development, could assist local residents in their job preparation process.

In-School Ventures

22. A Center created by the school involving teachers, students, and local citizens could experiment with the development, use, and sale of neighborhood technologies to improve the local economy. These technologies could include solar energy systems, greenhouse horticulture, energy-saving activities and materials, waste treatment, and recycling systems.

23. Students could develop commercial ventures for community maintenance and improvement. These could include contracts to maintain and develop railroad and local public transit embankments, maintenance of tot lots for the park authority, tree planting projects with local block clubs, etc.

24. Using school facilities, develop a student enterprise to prepare and deliver Meals on Wheels to homebound citizens.

25. Students and teachers could develop an enterprise using school equipment, when not in use, to create a computer center providing bookkeeping, word processing, or mailing services for local enterprises.

26. Enterprise "incubators" could be developed in local schools. There, students would plan and develop student-run community enterprises such as growing flowers, auto repair, or a "rent-a-kid" service.

27. The profits from these ventures could be used to create a scholarship fund or contributed to a community economic development fund.

Facilities

28. The school could develop a student-run "latch-key" program for the children of working parents (perhaps staffed, in part, by older students).

29. Community facilities needed by both students and citizens could be used by both groups and cut back on the costs of public facilities. Thus, the community library, gym, and swimming pool could be in the school bringing citizens, teachers, and students into more frequent contact with each other.

Purchasing

30. Local schools could make special efforts to contract for goods and services with local merchants. They could cooperate with local economic development efforts to help create local markets for local ventures. In large school systems, local authority for purchasing could be granted to encourage support of local vendors.

31. Students could conduct a study of their school's purchasing patterns and procedures. This information could then be made available to local merchants and economic development groups.

The Partnership Process

These "31 flavors" of school-community partnerships do not exhaust the spectrum of possibilities. We see three essential steps in moving the partnership concept from rhetoric to reality: 1) organize a group to explore how such a partnership might be forged in its community; 2) work together to create a vision of the ways in which this partnership could address key problems within both the school and the neighborhood it serves; and 3) try to get one or more mutually beneficial partnership activities *up and running this year.*

Even if these first attempts at partnership are modest ones, it is important to start acting upon this idea and winning small victories. The tangible — and attainable — rewards of better schools, better education, and better communities make this partnership too vital to ignore any longer.

School Resources to Invest in Community

As the 31 projects suggest, the local school is a tremendous resource for assisting local communities in their development process. Dr. Jonathan Sher, President of Rural Education and Development, Inc. provided the Forum a list of the assets schools can invest in their communities. These resources make clear the school's right (and responsibility) to be a full and active partner in the development process.

- ***Facilities***

Schools are places where community groups can meet. They also can serve as places that "incubate" community activities — from small businesses to neighborhood festivals to social service programs.

- ***Materials and equipment***

The computer, communication and duplicating equipment in schools can be used in support of, or shared with, community groups. Similarly, the books and library can be used by local people as a resource.

- ***Purchasing power***

The materials, commodities, and services purchased by schools can be directed to initiate, support, or expand neighborhood enterprises, including those created by local young people.

- ***Employment practices***

As a major employer in most neighborhoods and towns, the school's hiring practices can focus upon local residents.

- ***Courses***

Through existing classes or newly created evening courses, schools can provide education and training for residents or groups who seek to participate in the area's development efforts.

- ***Teachers***

In every neighborhood the teachers are a concentrated pool of highly trained and specialized adults with critical skills and essential knowledge that they can contribute to the efforts of local groups involved in development activities.

- ***Financial capacity***

Schools have the local power to generate and receive special funds through bond issues and proposals to government agencies, corporations, and foundations not usually accessible to community groups. This special capacity can be an important resource in a community development strategy.

- ***Young people***

The students with ideas, energy, and idealism can become important actors through classes and internships in the local community development process.

The Need for Partnership

As schools have become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, public and private schools in many rural and urban communities have lost their power as valuable

community resources. And many economically distressed towns, communities, and neighborhoods have begun to struggle toward economic revitalization without the valuable contributions of the local schools.

At the same time, school leaders repeatedly call upon the local community leadership to join the schools in solving their fiscal and legislative crises. Many school people call this effort a "school-community partnership." Unfortunately, throughout the United States there are signs that the "partnership" is weakening. One of the reasons is that often it is not a partnership at all.

Genuine partnerships involve both partners in contributing to the other. However, many modern schools directly contribute little or nothing to local community development1 while expecting local community groups to rally again and again to the defense of the school. This unequal partnership is often reflected in waning community support. This loss of support is especially tragic in those economically distressed rural and urban neighborhoods where the school's pool of skills, talent, ability, and insight is desperately needed in the process of community regeneration.

Clearly, we need a new kind of partnership. We need to create partnerships in which schools and communities contribute directly to the development of each other.

This new partnership also will provide a new basis for educational renewal. The idea here is not to burden teachers, students, and school administrators with yet another set of expectations that detract from the school's ability to accomplish its fundamental educational objectives. The fact of the matter is that study after study — echoed by depressingly high dropout rates and the low achievement of many who remain in school — "reveal" that current school programs are not working well. Isolating students and teachers in classrooms year after year carrying out textbook-driven assignments that bore and alienate many of those involved is not the best educational strategy we could possibly create.

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[1]Educators would argue that the schooling they provide to the local children is a major contribution to local development.

This *Primer* suggests that linking schools and their communities in direct, dynamic, and meaningful revitalization can serve as the foundation for an educational revitalization as well. For example, publishing a neighborhood newspaper in conjunction with a community organization is far more likely to inspire students to take an interest in proper communication skills (and current events) than simply handing in an assignment to a teacher. Having a "real world" laboratory and constituency for the work they do could greatly increase the maturation for, and efficiency of, the overall learning process among students and teachers alike. Therefore, we propose this partnership, not instead of "real" education, but to enhance genuine academic learning and genuine community education.

Afterword

The information in this *Primer* was created at the Chicago Innovations Forum. The discussion was begun with two presentations. The first, by Dr. Jonathan Sher, Route 1, Box 323K, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514, defined the resources schools can contribute to community revitalization. The second presentation was by Mr. Joseph Bute, Executive Director, Northside Civic Development Corp., 415 E. Ohio Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15212. Mr. Bute, a former director of a local Chicago neighborhood organization, presented a paper describing projects he felt the schools in his neighborhood could undertake in helping the community renew itself.

Readers may contact Dr. Sher and Mr. Bute directly if they would like further information.

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The work of the Neighborborhood Innovations Network is now carried on by The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research. The ABCD Institute is co-directed by John Kretzmann and John McKnight.

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