

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

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According to Humayun Kabir, "A school is and ought to be a reflection of the life of the community." The community is meant to employ a wider group of people located within fairly recognizable boundaries, and related to each other by socio-economic and civic activities which produce oneness among them, sufficient to develop a recognizable identity as a group. The main group and agents involved in the dynamics of the relationship between school and community are: school administration, teachers, non-teaching staff, students and parents, governing bodies and school board. The word 'community' is made up of two words – 'com' and 'munis'. 'com' means 'together' and 'munis' means 'to serve', so the meaning of 'community' is 'to serve together'. In other words, we can say that the community is a group of people, in which people live together and use their rights by cooperating with each other. Ginsberg says that "By community it is to be understood a group of social beings living a common life including all the infinity variety and complexity of relations which results from common life or constitute it."

In today's legislation, public rhetoric, and educational policy, community involvement plays an increasingly prominent role in supporting school success. Reminiscent of John Dewey's early calls for community schools at the turn of the twentieth century and demands by parents and community groups for community control in the 1960s, school-community engagement is hardly a new concept. However, supported by recent educational policies and renewed community interest, schools and communities are finding new and familiar ways to work together. Bringing schools and communities together is not easy and often reflects school environments that have found it hard to engage with students' families. Urban schools in particular have grown increasingly distant from the families they serve, leaving those schools as isolated institutions unable to communicate effectively with students and their families. These situations can often result in schools having low parent participation, or unequal power relationships between parents and school staff can leave families feeling unwelcome or uninvited to participate in their child's education.

However, these disconnected schools and communities may often have access to community organizations that have built relationships and cultural knowledge of local communities and their families. *Building school-community relationship* can be a valuable resource for educators who are interested in engaging schools with communities. If schools and communities can benefit from

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collaborating, how can schools and communities begin to build these relationships? Collaboration that involves the school (teachers, school administrators, and other educators), and community (health and human service providers, business representatives, and other community members) has been heralded as an effective way to reform and improve services for children and families.

Stages and strategies of school - community relationship development:

Many researchers have described relationship development as a series of stages or phases (for example, Melaville, Blank, and Asayesh, 1993). The four stages and the expected outcomes for each stage are briefly outlined, as follows:

Stage 1: Initiating the Relationship- Potential partners begin to engage in a dialogue about the needs of children and families in the community, develop respect for each other's differing viewpoints, and come to understand the concepts of school-community relationship and collaboration, and what these might mean for their community.

Stage 2: Building the Relationship - Potential partners begin to identify gaps in existing services and resources, prioritize their concerns, strengthen group cohesiveness, participate in joint activities, and develop mechanisms for sharing information and resources.

Stage 3: Developing a Shared Vision - Partners continue to prioritize desired outcomes of their work together and develop a vision which reflects those outcomes. They explore ideas for realizing their vision, and share responsibility for establishing linkages across programs.

Stage 4: Translating Planning into Collaborative Action- Partners identify and assess the feasibility of activities that address their desired outcomes. They might develop a plan for implementing one or more feasible activities.

Benefits of school-community relationship:

I. Connections Benefiting School from Community:

Schools creating community connector roles within their school culture benefit on several levels from connections established:

- Schools become community members through consistent relationship building, while maintaining high levels of local visibility.
- The Connector establishes institutional legitimacy in politically complex community areas.
- Perceptions of students improve. Students are now seen as children who live in our community, not scary strangers. Neighbours recognize the assets of the students and the value of their participation in community activities.
- Community connections strengthen recruitment outreach activities.

II. Connections Benefiting Community from School:

Community organizations, residents, and businesses benefit from strong relationships with schools that ultimately support the entire community:

- Schools can be perceived as a central location to share information with community residents.
- Schools have facilities that can be used as meeting spaces, community conference centres, and sites for community events.
- Students serve as volunteers and interns in community-based organizations and business achievement and strengthen school protective factors.

III. Connections Supporting Teachers:

Teachers can find their work is enhanced by community connections:

- The Asset Map not only develops meaningful school-community connections, but also creates a resource directory. Teachers and social workers benefit by finding social support services to benefit students and families.
- Relationships cultivated can contribute to classroom learning.
- Teachers and staff can participate in community events along with their classes. These experiences can be used to include community history as a reference point for classroom work.

IV. Connections Supporting Students:

Students benefit individually, in addition to the school:

- Relationships enable students to learn more about their own community. These relationships create stronger links with local businesses and community organizations during after school time.
- Business owners, residents, and community organizations come to know the students by name. These relationships add to the student's social capital and extend their social networks.
- Organizations that express deficit views of neighbourhood teenagers begin to see their potential and ability to contribute to their community. Concerns for the students' well-being increased as the perceptions of residents changed, increasing the number of adults supporting local youth.

Ways to Improve school-community relationship:

There are a variety of activities through which schools can establish better relationship with the community. Some suggestions to improve this relationship are as follows:

- **Encourage community use of school facilities** - Often the school building remains empty after the end of the normal school day. Encouraging non-profit community groups to use the facilities is not only a good use of resources but it also provides an opportunity for the school to put its best

foot forward. Some schools have reported a reduction in vandalism because of various activities that take place in the school premises.

- **Develop an effective school use policy** – Many schools already have a custodian on duty at night and the small amount of time that is spent opening the facility.
- **Student Recognition** - Invite students who earned a place on the honour roll to an Honours Banquet, the banquet can be held at a local restaurant during school hours or in the evening. In many communities, restaurants may be willing to support a program of this nature by providing meals at cost or even at reduced prices. Invite prominent people to speak at the banquet - educational leaders, political leaders, business people; the list can be endless.
- **Honour Society** - Make a determined effort to share the recognition of students by honouring them during the school day, with other students in attendance. Most parents are more than willing to come in during the day to participate in the ceremony. If it is not possible to have the ceremony during the day, have it in the evening but be sure to invite faculty, staff and students to attend.
- **Invite senior citizens** - Provide passes to senior citizens of the area to attend all school functions at no charge; while some will provide a donation in exchange for the ticket, many will appreciate the extra welcome provided by the school.
- **Back to School Week** - Choose a week during the school year to invite parents and community members to the school. Businesses have been more and more willing to provide release time to their employees for activities of this nature. Make a special effort to personally invite community and business leaders to attend school for the day, or part of the day.
- **Honours Assemblies** - At the end of each marking period, hold an honours assembly at which students on the honour roll receive certificates, bumper stickers and gold cards for having earned a place on the Honour Roll.
- **Career Day** - Hold annual career days, not only is this a good educational experience for the students, it helps local business people learn more about the school and its needs; conversely, it helps us understand the employment needs of business in that locality.
- **News releases** - News releases mailed to local media can be helpful. Publish things such as honour rolls, special class projects or activities, assemblies, school activities, etc.
- **Positive Reinforcement** - Faculty members should be encouraged to contact the families of students by phone or letter when the youngster has shown significant improvement or demonstrated positive qualities of

behaviour. Administrators can also increase rapport with parents by contacting them when the youngster has done something good.

School-community relationships can interconnect many resources and strategies to enhance communities that support all youth and their families. They could improve schools, strengthen neighbourhoods and lead to a noticeable reduction in young people's problems. Building such relationships requires visioning, strategic planning, creative leadership and new multifaceted roles for professionals who work in schools and communities.

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