

*Empowering* **YOUTH**  
*for School and Community*  
*Change*

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# Chapter 4 *It takes a Village to Raise a Child*

When educators, families and communities work together, children do better in school. Incorporating parent and community partners with service learning or youth programs can deepen the experience for everyone involved. “This all makes sense”, you may be saying, “but how can I successfully engage parents and the community?” This chapter is designed to answer that question.

## Parent Engagement

“Schools that are most successful in engaging parents and other family members in support of their children’s learning look beyond traditional definitions of parent involvement—participating in a parent teacher organization or signing quarterly report cards—to a broader conception of parents as full partners in the education of their children”.<sup>14</sup> Youth programs outside of the school day can also engage parents in their child’s learning. The key is to build solid relationships with parents in any environment.

Building relationships with parents can start by asking them to be involved in service learning or youth leadership programs. At the beginning of the school year or project you are working on, ask parents how they would like to be involved in their child’s classes and extracurricular activities. Maybe a phone call, e-mail or note home. Instead of assigning them a role or task, or giving them a finite list of ways parents can be involved, ask them what role they would like to play in your classroom/youth program that matches their skills and interests. Have some ideas in mind just in case they are not sure how they’d like to be involved.

There are many perceived barriers to including parents as authentic partners in their child’s education, and just as many creative solutions to overcome these challenges. Here’s a list of a few. How many apply to you?

### *Words of Wisdom*

One of the best things you can do as an educator is form relationships with parents. Call them to tell them how well their child is doing in class or in your program. Ask them how they want to be involved in the projects you do, or for ideas to make the projects stronger. Attend Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) meetings. Invite parents to work with you to make decisions about their child’s education!

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>	<i>Overcoming the Barrier</i>
Time Constraints: <i>“I would if I had enough time”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reexamine priorities – if parent engagement is a priority to you, you may have to shuffle your commitments around to make it work. Think to yourself, “Do I really need to spend my time doing _____?” Ask the same question to parents.</li> <li>• Commit to a meeting time that works for everyone. Think creatively – does a parent meeting always have to happen at school? What about home visits?</li> <li>• Work with parents to overcome obstacles like transportation and work schedules.</li> </ul>
Resource Constraints: <i>“I could if I had enough money”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach local community organizations and foundations, colleges, state education agencies, etc. Learn about their vision, mission and goals before you approach them, and think about where yours overlaps.</li> <li>• Write grants! There are many foundations and organizations just waiting to hear from you.</li> <li>• Look around you. What resources do you or your parents have that could be contributed to the good of the cause? Think about your talents (cooking, crafts), time, or treasures (items, financial contributions).<sup>15</sup></li> <li>• Plan how you will work together to make the most of what you have.</li> </ul>
Relationship Forming: <i>“I want to get to know parents, but I don’t know how, and they won’t come to an event that I plan anyway.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan a family night or a social event for parents and family members. Do this monthly or quarterly. There’s nothing like bonding over bowling and a piece of pizza. Fun is good!</li> <li>• Ask questions: Ask parents what they would like to see out of your class/program.</li> <li>• Call home when their child has done something well. Every parent wants to hear about their child’s successes.</li> </ul>

<sup>14</sup>Funkhouser, Janie; Gonzales Miriam. “Family Involvement in Children’s Education – Successful Local Approaches”. Dept of Educational Research and Improvement, US Dept of Education, Washington DC, Feb, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Youth As Philanthropists. Community Partnerships with Youth, <http://www.cpyinc.org>

### Beliefs About Parent Engagement

*"Parents don't want to help anyway."  
"What happens here is my responsibility- not theirs."*

- Training is crucial! Provide information and training to parents and your colleagues about the importance of parent education.
- Find out if your community or state has an organization that specializes in these trainings. In Indiana, the Indiana Center for Family, School & Community Partnerships specializes in this.
- Partner with other educators. Once your colleagues understand the importance of parent engagement, work with them to create a sustainable plan for long-term parent engagement.

If this all seems overwhelming, start with small doses. Any amount of energy that you devote to forming relationships with parents—even one parent—can make a difference. If you decide to make a difference in the way you engage parents, remember that change takes time. Don't give up if parents are taken off guard by your interest in working with them—remember the positive impact that you will be introducing to their child's life as well as their own.

## Community Engagement

"I operate with the fundamental belief that all young people have a desire to contribute to others' lives (even if they are not fully aware of this themselves!), whether it is hanging out with a lonely friend, doing chores at home, helping an elderly relative, or volunteering in their community."

-Megan Howey, Indiana Harmony VISTA State Director

## *Benefits of Engaging Youth in their Community*

Engaging youth in their community can have a life long effect and has been proven to be a gateway to future civic action. For example, young people who participate in community service experiences are more likely to vote and to join community organizations fifteen years down the road than adults who did not participate in such experiences during high school.<sup>16</sup> Community organizations also realize the positive effects of student involvement in their work. In a 1998 poll by Princeton Survey Research Associates, 78 percent of organizations believe that young people have the necessary skills to be effective volunteers.<sup>17</sup> In the experience of Harmony VISTA members, most community organizations and community members have a desire to work with young people—to teach them new skills, to guide/mentor them down a path, and to work with them to fill a community need.

A three-year study in Minneapolis, Minnesota concluded that "carefully developed collaborative efforts [of a school and its community] can achieve meaningful benefits for students, schools, and the broader community."<sup>18</sup>



These benefits include:

- Bringing community resources into schools.
- Connecting students and schools to their communities.
- Building community pride in students and communities.
- Making school facilities more accessible to community use.
- Pooling resources to create facilities and programs that benefit all partners.
- Improving teachers' approaches and attitudes towards their work.

The benefits to youth also include the lessons they learn and the skills that they build while helping their community. In the 1996 Gallup Poll, teens said the benefits received from volunteering are: learning to respect others, learning to be helpful and kind, learning to understand people who are different from them, developing leadership skills, becoming more patient; and better understanding of good citizenship.

The major reasons cited by teens for volunteering were that they felt compassion for people in need, they could do something for a cause in which they believe, and they believed that if they help others, others will help them. (Independent Sector/Gallup, 1996)

<sup>16</sup>Youniss, J., McLellan, J.A., & Yates, M. (1997). What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 40:620–631

<sup>17</sup> Princeton Survey Research Associates. (1998). *Community Organizations' Use of Young People as Volunteers: Report of a National Survey of Community Organizations That Use Volunteers*. Prepared for Do Something, Inc. New York: Do Something.)

<sup>18</sup>Anderson, Terri; Nelson, Vicki. *Schools and Communities Working Together: The Center for School Change*. Minneapolis, MN. June 2002.

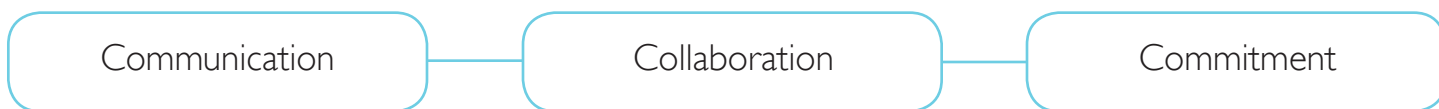
### *Words of Wisdom*

Knowledge, open communication and relationship forming are the keys to understanding each other. Lack of these things can lead to assumptions and mistrust.

There is no "one size fits all" approach to creating a parent engagement plan. Co-create with parents the way that you will work together. Flexibility is important- parent involvement can take many forms and may not require parents' presence at a workshop, meeting or school.

## Defining High Quality Community Engagement

Basic building blocks of effective community engagement include three major elements:



*Communication*— Good communication is central to any community engagement strategy. Take the time to set up a communication plan—who do you need to contact? How will you keep all of the stakeholders informed of what’s happening? How will you let the media and the public know what you are doing? How will you keep track of whom you have contacted and whom you still need to reach? How can the young people working with you help? How could you make this a learning experience for them? Effective communication is one of the most important, and often neglected, pieces of a strong community engagement plan.

*Collaboration*— Working with others, especially in the planning or implementation of an idea or project, can add a great deal to a project, and perhaps take some stress off of you. With whom in the community are you collaborating to make this project a success? With whom would you like to collaborate? Remember the old saying “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know”? This applies to planning projects for youth just as much as anything else. HarmonyVISTA members’ strategies for collaboration include networking in your community; asking colleagues about people they know who might be interested in your project; and asking young people to talk with their parents. Chances are your enthusiasm for what you are doing will spread, and people will be excited to work with you.

*Commitment*— Stick with it! If the first community organization you contact does not call you back, don’t sweat it. Try someone else. Engaging the community can seem complicated or overwhelming at first, but as you communicate your ideas and collaborate with others, your commitment level and that of others will escalate.

## Methods of Engaging Youth in the Community

There are several different ways to engage youth in their communities. Each are similar with slightly different goals, experiences, and outcomes.

### Direct Service

“Activities involve working directly with people. This could be cross age tutoring or mentoring or inter-generational work such as doing an oral history with a senior or participating in regular activities at a nursing home.”<sup>19</sup>

### Indirect Service

Activities that benefit others but the planning team does not participate with the people who are being benefited. For example, teens designing a tutoring program in which other teens tutor younger students. The organizers are not directly tutoring but play a coordinating role.

### Advocacy

Youth voice their opinions and ideas to help solve a specific issue. Activities can include making a presentation to a city council, writing letters to government officials, and/or building awareness around a specific issue.

### Community Service

Volunteering in a community to help others. Community service does not necessarily link to classroom work. It can consist of one-time projects, or can be ongoing. Often it does not involve a high level of planning or coordinating on the part of the young person. Reflection is not always a part of community service.

### Service Learning

A great deal of the work of the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project has been service learning. Harmony VISTA volunteers have found that service learning is a very effective way to engage youth in “real-life” learning – showing young people how what they learn in class connects directly with skills they will need in the “real world”.

Service learning is an instructional method that “links academic learning with student service that benefits the community. Service learning projects must include academic preparation, [meaningful] service activities, and structured reflection” (Maryland Student Service

<sup>19</sup> National Youth Leadership Council, 1995.

Alliance). Sometimes the most unengaged traditional learners will shine when given an opportunity to combine hands-on learning with a community issue that they care about.

Strong service learning projects include the following key components:

- Youth and educators work together to develop the project's focus
- The project meets a recognized need in the community or school
- The project ties curricular objectives (state standards) to the service activity
- Reflection is included throughout the project
- Continuous evaluation

Service learning can be initiated at all academic levels (K-16) and can be integrated into any subject. There are many examples of service learning projects and resources for service learning (grants, project guides, materials) on the internet. Many are also listed in the back of this guidebook.

### Evaluation, Research, and Policy-Making

In Chapter Two, youth participation in evaluation, research, and policy-making was briefly described. Young people can get highly involved in their community by evaluating a community issue or event, researching a community problem, and/or participating in policy-making at the local, state, or federal levels. All of these methods establish meaningful ways for youth to participate in their community, deepen their understanding of specific issues, and gather information for future action.

## ***tips for Getting Connected with the Community***

Learning about your community can look several ways, but often serves the purpose of identifying needs and issues. Youth may find some of the activities below fun and helpful in assessing their neighborhood.

<i><b>Activity</b></i>	<i><b>Description</b></i>
Brainstorm	A group method of listing a large number of ideas. No one evaluates the ideas until the list is complete. There are no dumb ideas. One person volunteers to record the ideas on paper or flipchart.
Neighborhood Walkabout	Take a walk through a neighborhood and record their observations. Identify all the assets (good things) and liabilities (bad things or missing things) you encounter.
Surveys	Form a list of questions for neighbors, family members, classmates, and other community members to answer. This can be done either verbally or in the form of a questionnaire.
Interviews	Visit community leaders and members to interview them about community needs. Places to visit might include community centers, homeless shelters, day care centers, and nursing homes.
Review Newspapers	Read through magazines and newspapers. Highlight problems and issues in the communities, or world events of major concern. The front page and city sections work best.

## ***More tips for Connecting with Your Community***

- Have each person in your group brainstorm a list of community organizations which, in their past, they have utilized, or on which they have relied.
- Have each person consider which groups may have been working to help their community. Remind each person that a group (i.e. a self-defense education class) may have been informally helping its community, or may have been working alone.
- Have each person then consider which groups had chosen to make formal connection with other community organizations or efforts. An example might be a church choosing to sponsor a youth event.
- Next, have each person pair with another person to consider which group might have the most impact on a community, the group that knows its neighbor, or the one that works in isolation.
- Finally, have each person share out with the rest of the large group what they learned from the exercise.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter discussed strategies for involving parents and the community in your project(s). Parent engagement is an incredibly powerful tool in empowering youth. When youth see adults get involved in what matters to them, it can deepen young people's passion in their work. Navigating through obstacles to parental and community engagement is an essential step to forming solid partnerships with parents and the community.

The next chapter is about making meaning of the work you are doing in your school or community. It includes tips for integrating reflection into your project and examples for celebrating your hard work.