EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:
Community Engagement for Student Success

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Disclaimer

MAEC is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this paper were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.
How should we define community? Of the many working definitions of “community,” we prefer the definition offered by Chavis and Lee: “Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs [and experience]. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of the community, influence their environments and each other” (2015). This definition acknowledges both the aspirational goals that individual people and entities bring to a place and the sense of connection that emerges. These aspirational goals are often understated, particularly for low-income individuals and people of color and the communities in which they live.

Each community has a complex makeup of intricate systems, cultures, and resources. Developing relevant and lasting systems for safe and supportive school environments requires communities, and the people and institutions within them, to be at the center. Tackling complex problems requires change within and across institutions and local systems and among the individuals working and living within them. Schools exist within communities. When a community is engaged in schooling, the entire school (including students and teachers) has expanded access to the resources offered by the community. The community also has an opportunity to deepen its investment in the outcomes of its youth.
Community engagement is commonly used to describe place-based institutional-and individual-level collaboration. Recently, placed-based initiatives have adopted some consistent structures and practices that we should apply to our work toward safe and supportive school environments. A 2015 Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy report identifies two critical components of place-based initiatives—neighborhood initiatives and systems initiatives. Both components align to create tangible, lasting improvements (Hopkins and Ferris, 2015).

When considering processes and strategies for engaging diverse communities – particularly marginalized communities – leaders in a school or district must first consider their own readiness. Engaging communities in change that will affect them requires leadership to adopt early on a set of agreements or principles that ground efforts and engagement. CEE’s forthcoming publication, *The “C” in FSCE*, explains and expands upon two grounding constructs: Cultural and Linguistic Competence (CLC) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). We provide these constructs as models of common and useful tools to create a guidepost for collaboration and as an accountability tool that might serve as a reference point throughout the collaboration process.

**PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?**

**GET TO KNOW YOUR SCHOOL’S NEIGHBORHOOD**

Understand and acknowledge the different types of neighborhoods and circumstances. One size does not fit all, and no two problems are the same. Schools may need to collect data to understand the unique assets and barriers within their communities. Educators can learn this by:

- Conducting community walks,
- Scheduling meetings (such as PTO meetings) at a community center instead of the school,
- Conducting home visits,
- Going to community events, and
- Holding community events that you think people will attend.
LEARN WHAT ASSETS EXIST IN YOUR SCHOOL’S NEIGHBORHOOD
Community asset mapping offers a clear picture of the resources and gaps from a strengths-based, community-driven perspective. By mapping community assets, you can learn about the specific skills, services, and capacities present in the community that can support school staff, students, and families.

GO BEYOND SYMBOLIC EFFORTS
Resident engagement can take different forms, but without shared leadership and responsibility for defining goals, residents are often just used as “window dressing” for a prescribed initiative. “Community engagement” is not necessarily or always community-centered. Community engagement exists on a spectrum. The International Association for Public Participation (2007) drafted a spectrum highlighting the levels of a community-centered change and improvement process (see graphic below).

CULTIVATE NEW KINDS OF LEADERSHIP
Think creatively about people who should be involved. Community organizations, faith-based organizations, and local businesses, for example, all have people who have a vested interest in the community. Their ideas and perspectives can enhance the process. Hopkins and Ferris (2015) assert that “[f]or initiatives to be sustainable there must also be a broad base of local leaders—and ways to continually renew or circulate leadership over time.”

Efforts to define and create safe and supportive school environments should focus on shared leadership and should be mindful that:

- All perspectives matter.
- Assumptions and values should be explicit.
- Inclusion is complex and not always easy to implement.
- Broadened definitions of knowledge and data are necessary.
- Community is complex and diverse.
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“社区成员和家长在规划和实施社区学校努力中发挥了关键作用。正是社区成员推动了这项变革。当地企业、非营利组织和社区组织作为规划伙伴参与进来，并继续与家长和居民一起指导Oyler的工作。”虽然还没有完全走出困境，但“自成为社区学校以来，Oyler的学生数量从高中毕业并进入大学的人数在创纪录地增加。Oyler在该社区的过去3年中毕业的学生人数超过了之前85年的总和。Oyler的学业成绩一直在稳步提高”（IEL, 2018）。由于有意的社区参与，OCLC看到了学生毕业率的改善，并与为学生和家庭服务的组织建立了深厚的社区关系，这些组织提供视野、健康（身体和精神）、公民参与、家庭食物服务、辅导/导师制、大学入学支持和就业支持（https://oyler.cps-k12.org）。

高等教育机构也在参与社区建设。明尼苏达大学有一个“韧性的社区项目”，“是一个跨学科的项目……它支持明尼苏达州的大学和社区建立为期一年的伙伴关系，以促进当地可持续性和韧性。”这个项目旨在将学生和教员与社区联系起来，以增强当地解决可持续性和韧性问题的能力。在帮助社区的同时，大学也正在培养未来的领导人，这些领导人将成为未来可持续性实践者的培训者（https://rcp.umn.edu/）。

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**PART III: THE CASE STUDIES**

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County (a rapidly growing and diversifying area in the southwestern Twin Cities metropolitan area) and Ramsey County (in the heart of the Twin Cities metropolitan area). "The collaboration provided the city and its residents with case studies, data analysis, concept plans, designs, and policy recommendations to build resilience in Ramsey, and offered more than 275 students the opportunity to tackle real projects as part of their coursework, working directly with Ramsey city staff, residents, and business owners."

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Keep an eye out for our forthcoming publication that will help schools and school systems leverage a community’s fuller capacity to support students’ overall wellbeing and academic achievement. It will offer specific strategies and resources to engage diverse communities and to help guide schools and school communities to understand and create common frames for planning with cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity in mind.

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RESOURCES

Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD)
https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx

Coalition for Community Schools I Institute for Educational Leadership,
www.communityschools.org

Community Research Lab Toolkit
Janice C. Burns, Dagmar Pudrzynska Paul, and Silvia R. Paz
Advancement Project—Healthy City
December 2011, updated April 2012
www.communityscience.com/knowledge4equity/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf

“Logic Model Workbook,”
Innovation Network, Inc.
www.innonet.org/media/logic_model_workbook_0.pdf

Participatory Asset Mapping: A Community Research Lab Toolkit
Advancement Project
Washington, DC: Advancement Project—Healthy City Community Research Lab, 2011
www.communityscience.com/knowledge4equity/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf
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The University of Minnesota, Resilient Communities Project website, retrieved August 30, 2018 from https://rcp.umn.edu/.