5272 River Road, Suite 340   *301-657-7741*
Bethesda, MD 20816   *www.maec.org*

EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:
Community Engagement for Student Success

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Phoebe Schlanger, MAEC
adapted from a forthcoming CEE publication by Vanessa Coleman, EdD

Disclaimer

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PART I: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNITY?

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.

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.

Outreach	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Shared Leadership
• Communication flows from one to the other to inform	• Communication flows to the community and then back seeking answers	• Communication flows both ways in a participatory form	• Communication flow is bidirectional	• Strong bidirectional relationship and final decision-making is at the community level

Community-Centered Change and Improvement Process

PART III: THE CASE STUDIES

Sometimes, the community is there to support the school. Sometimes, the school is there to support the community. For example, in Cincinnati, Ohio, the Lower Price Hill community underwent enormous change. Most students in the area live in poverty and for many years most students did not graduate high school. After the Ohio Supreme Court ruling that the state financing system was unconstitutional, the state had an opportunity and expectation that it could turn around schools like Oyler Community Learning Center (formerly Oyler School).

"Community members and parents played an integral role in the planning and implementation of the community school effort. It was the members of the community that pushed for the transformation into a preK-12 school. Local businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations were involved as planning partners and continue to participate with parents and residents in guiding Oyler's work." Though not out of the woods yet, "since becoming a community school, Oyler's students are graduating from high school and matriculating to college in record numbers. Oyler has graduated more students in the neighborhood from high

school in the past 3 years than in the collective 85 prior years. Oyler has steadily improved student achievement" (IEL, 2018). As a result of intentional community engagement, OCLC has seen an improvement in student graduation rates and has deep community-based relationships with youth and family serving organizations that provide, vision, health (physical and mental), civic engagement, family food services, tutoring/mentoring, college access supports, and employment supports (https://oyler.cps-k12.org).

Higher education institutions also engage in building community. The University of Minnesota has a Resilient Communities Project, "a cross-disciplinary program…that supports one-year partnerships between the University and communities in Minnesota to advance local sustainability and resilience." The project is designed to connect students and faculty to communities in order to build local capacity around sustainability and resilience issues. While helping the community, the University is also training the next generation of leaders to be future sustainability practitioners (https://rcp.umn.edu/).

For the 2018-2019 year, U of M chose to engage with two counties: Scott

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.

Written by Phoebe Schlanger, MAEC
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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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