



# **A COMMUNITY ALIVE WITH LEARNING**

**THE STORY OF THE WEST SIDE NEIGHBORHOOD  
LEARNING COMMUNITY**

**2001-2005**

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**A Community Alive with Learning:**  
The Story of the West Side Neighborhood Learning Community  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The link between education and civic life is reflected in many education policies pioneered in Minnesota, from community education to community service and early childhood family education. This linkage has been revived in the Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC). The NLC aims to improve learning for children by reconnecting education to civic life and developing a *culture of learning*. It embeds children's educational development in a larger vision of neighborhood vitality, city-wide institutional systems reform, and lively democratic renewal.

This report describes findings from the past five years' experience of community-based work in the West Side of St. Paul. The Neighborhood Learning Community has much to offer as an approach for out-of-school time learning, youth development and civic renewal. This report is intended to make this approach accessible to others concerned with "second shift" learning, youth development, and community revitalization.

Neighborhood-based ways of life have been eroded through administrative centralization and through the consolidation of schools, parks, libraries and other community institutions. The shift toward centralization has had injurious consequences. Many people feel – and are – far removed from the decisions about institutions and programs that impact everyday lives. As bureaucratic centralization weakens the possibility of solving local problems creatively, we see a lack of accountability for complex issues. Solving such issues requires accountability to be shared through citizen collaboration. Too often the broader civic purposes of youth development and public education have been obscured by a focus on job readiness and economic self-sufficiency.

The West Side Neighborhood Learning Community reinvigorates the best of Minnesota's civic traditions. Here, three ideas are central: **the importance of place, active and co-creative citizenship, and public work that reintegrates civic practices into the neighborhood fabric.** The NLC is a network of people and organizations working to create meaningful learning relationships across generations, ethnic groups, organizations and schools. Everyone is expected and invited to be a teacher, a learner and a co-creator of the common good.

With support from a four-year Wallace Foundation grant that began in 2002, the NLC embarked on larger scale experimentation, coordination, reflection and evaluation. A group of stakeholders formed a Coordinating Council to serve the dual purpose of coordinating NLC activities and providing leadership development for members. Also in 2002, a staff position of Community Connector was created to build relationships with individuals and organizations and to discover where informal learning is currently going on, who might contribute to new learning opportunities, and how resources and leadership for neighborhood learning might better connect.

In the years that followed, other innovations were hatched:

- West Side Teachers Institute: a program where teachers in West Side schools and community-based educators worked to increase school-community partnerships and to build bridges between formal and informal learning opportunities.
- West Side Circulator: a free bus that provides transportation among learning sites and public places in the neighborhood.
- Youth Apprenticeship Project: a summer program that provides West Side youth with paid apprenticeships at West Side organizations and businesses. Apprenticeships are combined with weekly workshops where youth develop leadership skills and consider careers in terms of the career's larger significance and importance in the world.
- All-Around-The-Neighborhood: a neighborhood-based, out-of-school initiative to create a West Side alive with learning led by parents, youth, community education, and staff of community organizations.

## Challenges and beyond

Three formidable but not insurmountable challenges face neighborhoods working to improve education inside and outside of schools.

1. *Fragmentation and duplication of out-of-school programming.*  
The reality of diminishing resources to support family and social services over the last decade has unleashed a competitive dynamic among nonprofit organizations that runs counter to community building efforts. In neighborhoods

where many social service organizations are located, the competition for dollars and numbers of clients can be fierce. Competition among organizations precludes thoughtful use of limited resources that would achieve a greater impact.

2. *Lack of connections between formal and informal learning.*

The disconnection of schools from neighborhoods impacts children and constrains resources that might otherwise enrich and expand their learning. Multiple barriers exist – some are attitudinal, some structural, others are cultural. For instance, school choice allows children to enroll in schools away from their neighborhoods. Accountability measures of benchmark tests narrow rather than expand learning opportunities, leaving little time for teachers to explore neighborhood resources.

3. *Nonalignment of systems that impact neighborhoods.*

The lack of coordination among city-wide systems intended to support out-of-school learning, like the library, parks and recreation, and transportation systems, is damaging to neighborhoods. City agencies tend to operate in isolated silos, creating obstacles that impede citizen involvement. These structural problems must be addressed to ensure public participation in local decision making and to avoid inadvertent weakening of neighborhoods.

Each requires building democratic power and political acumen. People who engage in this work develop a sense of civic agency and confidence. They believe that by working together, people can bring about change.

The Neighborhood Learning Community offers an important approach to re-align, re-connect and mobilize the strengths for learning that can still be found within our neighborhoods. The evidence is in: strong schools need strong communities, and strong communities can build strong schools. The NLC has learned how to create a community that is alive with learning.

## Moving Forward

Four strategies hold promise to address these complex, interrelated challenges:

1. Orient public policy to strengthen neighborhood civic life.
2. Build pathways between schools and neighborhoods.
3. Promote collaboration for neighborhood improvement.
4. Develop leadership that facilitates public action.



# MAPPING THE TRENDS

In Minnesota, there is a growing urgency to close the achievement gap between ethnic minority and Caucasian students. *Mind the Gap*, the analysis of Minnesota's socioeconomic disparities issued in late 2005 by the Itasca Group and the Brookings Institution, argued that Minnesota's future prosperity is in peril unless we start doing vastly better at ensuring the educational success of immigrants and students of color.

Much of the attention regarding closing this gap has focused on making schools more effective. But in St. Paul's West Side neighborhood, a growing network of parents, educators and community organizations have developed an approach that has as much to do with Minnesota's ability to flourish as do economic growth rates and competitive advantages. Education in Minnesota is inextricably linked to the health of our local economy *and* to the health of our civic life. Indeed, the link between education and civic life is reflected in many of the educational policies that Minnesota has pioneered, from community education to community service and early childhood family education. This linkage has been revived in an initiative called the Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC). The NLC develops a neighborhood *culture of learning*. It mobilizes the community's assets as well as the schools; focuses on out-of-school learning as well as in-school time; and embeds children's educational development in a larger vision of neighborhood vitality, city-wide institutional systems reform, and lively democratic renewal.

This report shares findings from the past five years' experience of community-based work in the West Side neighborhood. It describes the essential values and practices of the NLC approach, and shows the approach in action through case studies of two major learning opportunities generated by the NLC. This evidence indicates that the Neighborhood Learning Community has much to offer as an approach for out-of-school learning, youth development and civic renewal. This report is intended to make this approach accessible to others concerned with the challenges of "second shift" learning, youth development, and community revitalization. If the lessons of the West Side

Neighborhood Learning Community can be applied in neighborhoods throughout St. Paul and in communities across the state, we may be able to ensure Minnesota's competitiveness. By closing the achievement gap and simultaneously by expanding the sense of ownership and responsibility for children's education throughout a whole community, we will accomplish even more robust public purposes; we will build flourishing, civic-minded neighborhoods, integrate new immigrants, and overcome the growing fragmentation of our society. We will find a balance between pursuit of material well-being and a communal, purposeful civic life.

## **Background: diversity, disparities and the dismemberment of community**

Over the past 30 years, two major trends have marked the Twin Cities metropolitan area. First, ethnic diversity is increasing as immigrants and refugees from all over the globe resettle here, and migrants from across the United States are drawn to the region by economic opportunities, excellent schools, and high quality of life.

**“By expanding the sense of ownership and responsibility for children’s education throughout a whole community, we will accomplish even more robust public purposes; we will build flourishing, civic-minded neighborhoods.”**

This trend has operated in most U.S. cities, but is more pronounced in the Twin Cities because the population has increased faster than the national average and the historic population was overwhelmingly of white, Northern European descent.

The second trend is an erosion of community ties and the common infrastructure of public spaces, public goods, public institutions and public relationships. With these shifts we experience gated *geographic* communities as well as gated communities of ideas and cultures. Neighborhood-based ways of life have been eroded through administrative centralization, consolidation of schools, parks, libraries and other community institutions. This contributes to the detachment of professional training, professional practices, and professional identities from local civic cultures. In the private sector these trends are mirrored by the consolidation of many businesses into larger corporations and by the weakening of businesses' civic

roots in local areas. Big box retailing and franchise chains are capturing a growing market share. This centralization, often done in the name of efficiency, aims to lower costs and streamline management systems.

The effects of these two major trends are intensified by others. For example, the achievement gap is widely observed between children from middle class families and those from poorer families, often immigrants and families of color. At the same time, middle class life has become increasingly overscheduled, hypercompetitive, and consumerist. Neither the traditional Minnesota education system of neighborhood schools nor the more recent strategy of school choice programs has shown much success in attaining good educational outcomes for poor children and children of color or in balancing individual achievement on the one hand and social relatedness and public life, on the other.



The shift toward centralization of institutional systems and erosion of local community life has had other injurious consequences. St. Paul is known as a city with strong neighborhoods, but even in St. Paul it has become more difficult to create meaningful connections within one's neighborhood. For example, children who live in a public housing complex on the

West Side take buses to 17 different schools across the city.<sup>1</sup> Metro-wide, less than 25% of workers live in the city where they work, and 40% cross county lines for their jobs.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, many people feel – and are – far removed from where decisions are made about institutions and programs that impact their everyday lives. Professionals, and sometimes elected officials,

**“Children’s learning will improve if they grow up in a neighborhood with a culture of learning – one rich in learning opportunities, contexts and expectations.”**

with little first hand knowledge of local neighborhoods make decisions that affect neighborhood life. As the Kettering Foundation’s research has richly documented, we may grouse about how local branch institutions are run, but if we see ourselves primarily as customers, recipients, and beneficiaries, it is hard to imagine a way to run them better. In ceding our productive responsibility as citizens, we lose the vital dynamic at the heart of American public schools and at the heart of education more broadly. Educational institutions and settings are not only *for* publics, they are also necessarily *of* and *by* publics. They must be created and sustained by people who care about our democratic way of life and seek a balance between collective good and individual achievement.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, as bureaucratic centralization and cultural detachment weaken possibilities to solve local problems creatively, we see a lack of accountability for complex issues. Solving such issues requires shared accountability through citizen collaboration. This is especially true in the area of education policy where the measures of quality have narrowed. Too often the broader civic purposes of youth development and public education – engaging people as active, creative citizens shouldering the responsibilities of democratic self-government and the public work of solving common problems – have been obscured by a focus limited to only job readiness and economic self-sufficiency. “The real crisis we face is not a threat to America’s economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of our democratic and egalitarian culture,” argues Deborah Meier, a national education

leader. Meier recalls the “traditional public function of schools: to pass on the skills, aptitudes, and habits needed for a democratic way of life,” observing that these “are hard to come by; they are not natural to the species. They are as hard to teach as relativity.”<sup>4</sup>

As these processes advance, many people believe that the idea of lively connected neighborhoods and a vital civic life is a thing of the past. Increasingly, people do not require decision makers to take into account the impact of policy on neighborhood life. Instead, we witness a rising trend of privatization. People define individualism as “getting what’s mine,” rather than seeing individual success as each person having individual, unique things to contribute to the commonwealth.

### West Side Neighborhood Learning Community: a community-based approach to learning

The West Side Neighborhood Learning Community holds a different view – one that reinvigorates the best of Minnesota’s civic traditions. In the Neighborhood Learning Community three ideas are central: **the importance of place, active and co-creative citizenship, and public work that reintegrates civic practices into the neighborhood fabric.**

The Neighborhood Learning Community is a network of people and organizations working to highlight existing learning opportunities available in the neighborhood, while facilitating the creation of new learning opportunities by local organizations, community residents, parents and children. The NLC aims to create meaningful learning relationships across generations, ethnic groups, organizations, schools and the neighborhood. It hopes to raise the visibility of the creative work happening in the West Side neighborhood. In the NLC approach, diverse constituents and resources

of a neighborhood are organized around the goal of improved learning.

NLC leaders believe that children’s learning will improve if they grow up in a neighborhood with a *culture of learning* – one rich in learning opportunities, contexts and expectations. The neighborhood is a place dense with relationships, rich with history and memories, and alive with learning the skills, values, and aptitudes needed for an interdependent globalized world. Everyone is expected and invited to be a teacher, a learner and a co-creator of the common good.

Public work, defined as the sustained effort of a mix of people in public to create things of shared value, infuses the NLC approach. In the philosophy of public work, democracy is the ongoing work of the people creating a way of life together, and citizens are co-producers of this common life. Public work connects everyday practices to the ideas of democracy, bringing larger meaning to work and a renewed seriousness to citizen roles. Through public work, people gain visibility, authority, and reach larger intellectual horizons. NLC leaders believe that energy is unleashed when people address big ideas and when they can see their contributions to the larger discourse at local, state, and national levels. The NLC practices this approach in a setting typical



of tomorrow’s diverse Minnesota: its participants include Hmong (39%), white (27%), Latino (14%), Somali (10%), and others (10%).<sup>5</sup> Participants bridge four generations, speak five languages, and include long-time residents and new immigrants. They include parents, grandparents, community organizers, youth workers, children, youth, teachers, social workers, neighbors and citizens.

**“NLC projects are dedicated to strengthening learning in the neighborhood and building the neighborhood’s capacity to generate new learning.”**

These participants come together to create new learning projects, emerging out of their combined interests. While these learning projects include family involvement programs, out-of-school learning or youth activities, they are more than that. NLC opportunities are open-ended spaces that often involve multiple ages, organizations and goals. Each project is dedicated to strengthening learning in the neighborhood and building the neighborhood’s capacity to generate new learning.

**Alignment with youth development and student achievement research**

The NLC’s approach aligns with a growing body of research findings on youth development and student achievement.

Michelle Gambone, Adena Klem and James Connell reviewed the field of youth development research in their 2002 report, *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*.<sup>6</sup> They summarized the research, concluding that for youth to become healthy, successful adults, they must develop competency in three key areas. They must:

- Learn to be **productive** – to master basic life skills, carry out school and home assignments, and establish creative interests of their own.
- Learn to **connect** – to establish relationships with adults, both within their family and others within the community; to establish positive

peer relationships; and to connect with larger institutions such as religious and civic groups.

- Learn to **navigate** – to interact appropriately in diverse settings, to begin to take responsibility for themselves and others, and to make good decisions on risky or unhealthy behaviors such as premature sexual activity, substance abuse and criminal activity.

When certain supports and opportunities are available to children and youth, these outcomes are more likely to

be achieved. Beyond the basic prerequisites of adequate nutrition, health, shelter, and safety, they emphasize three particular kinds of supports and opportunities:

- **Multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers.**
- **Challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences.**
- **Meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership.**<sup>7</sup>

The NLC designs learning opportunities to address these three developmental outcome areas.

Along with these findings in youth development research, a growing chorus of scholars, researchers and practitioners has confirmed that family and community involvement increases student

**“NLC opportunities are open-ended spaces that involve multiple ages, organizations and goals.”**

achievement.<sup>8</sup> Summarizing over 20 reports, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development recently concluded that community schools – those connected to neighborhood resources and championing parent involvement – improve student learning, promote family engagement, and add vitality and trust to communities.<sup>9</sup> Citing over

50 studies, Henderson and Mapp concluded that the more families support their children's learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a recent analysis of 56 studies found that after-school and summer programs have a positive impact on student achievement in reading and mathematics.<sup>11</sup> Beyond improving student achievement, "second shift" out-of-school-time initiatives have been linked to improved school attendance, aspirations for the future and the habits of the mind central to work opportunities and civic participation.<sup>12</sup>





# THE NLC STORY

## Origins of the NLC

The Neighborhood Learning Community emerged from a deep history of community building in the West Side neighborhood. Some innovations in youth and family development that began in the 1990s were especially significant. A few longstanding local organizations played key roles.

**Jane Addams School for Democracy** began in 1996 as a popular education and public work project. Its goal is to create a space where people can connect across lines of difference and where immigrants and established residents form learning circles on topics of mutual interest. Inspired by the example of Jane Addams' Hull House and its work with immigrant families in Chicago a century earlier, by Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and the citizenship schools of the southern civil rights movement, and the public work and theory-building of numerous partnerships of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship in the early 1990s, Jane Addams School for Democracy brings people together across lines of age, culture, language and class. Jane Addams' founders were purposeful in maintaining open space where people can name and pursue their own learning interests together, and where everybody participates as teacher as well as learner.

**Youth Farm and Market Project** began operating on the West Side in the late 1990s with leadership from a young adult who had been involved at Jane Addams School as a college student. This student spotted vacant land in the neighborhood and viewed it as an under-utilized asset for youth learning and community enrichment. He negotiated with the owners of the parcels to make them available for farm and market activity. Youth Farm works with neighborhood children and youth to grow food in community gardens and sell it at local farmers' markets. Urban agriculture, environment, and economic activities are used as vehicles for youth leadership development, cultural nutrition, and youth organizing.

**West Side Citizens Organization (WSCO)** was founded in 1972 as a center of citizen participation and organizing and became the neighborhood's formal district council soon afterward. WSCO coordinates grassroots dialogue and policy advocacy on housing, economic development, land use and other issues.

It operates the civic infrastructure, including official linkages to city policy-making, through which people participate in public deliberation and decision-making.

The **Community Education** program of St. Paul Public Schools has a strong tradition of citizen leadership and involvement. On the West Side, a group of parents envisioned a more family-friendly organizational structure for Community Education programming. Instead of offering classes across multiple nights, with mom taking kickboxing on Monday and the children taking jewelry-making on Thursdays, they created *Monday Night Live!* Now children and adults take advantage of learning opportunities on the same night, with dinner and childcare. Neighborhood residents often teach these evening courses, using public schools as learning sites.

**West Side Family Center** was founded in the mid '90s by a group of West Side parents. The Center focused on strengthening families, providing rich development opportunities for youth, and engaging parents in leadership roles. By 1998, the Family Center was sponsoring "Community Dialogues" which brought together parents, other residents, and staff of local organizations to explore barriers to children participating in neighborhood learning opportunities and their families' ability to be engaged with them.

These projects, programs and organizations were centers of empowerment and civic engagement. All of them emphasized the ability of parents and community residents to serve as teachers, mentors, and collaborative problem solvers. They practiced intergenerational learning and collaboration. Through these various channels, a growing number of people and organizations in the neighborhood developed experience with learner-centered, community-based, civic-spirited education. A network of relationships began to be formed among parents, residents, and staff who shared these values.

Another significant precursor to the NLC was the **West Side Youth Collaborative**, which formed in 1995 when youth-serving agencies in the neighborhood pursued a state funded initiative that supported collaborative sponsorship of youth enrichment programming. Many participants found this to be a

frustrating partnership that was more competitive than collaborative. But the Youth Collaborative provided a basis for youth-serving organizations to begin building relationships and to explore the challenges and rewards of collaboration and community-based programming.

In 2001, building on community dialogues launched by West Side Family Center a few years earlier, an “Education Dialogue” was convened by Jane Addams School and WSCO. Fifty people who lived or worked on the West Side gathered to talk about West Side formal and informal learning opportunities for children, families and community members. Out of this process the Neighborhood Learning Community was born, with explicit emphasis on creating a culture of learning in the neighborhood that would reach beyond any single organization.

The NLC is guided by a theory of change which emphasizes expanding informal learning opportunities, including language learning opportunities, undergirded by leadership development and community capacity development so that the creation and coordination of learning opportunities can be ongoing and broadly owned.

*If children and adults are in spaces where learning is promoted for all, then children’s engagement in learning will be validated, reinforced and strengthened. Success requires more than delivering creative programs designed by professionals for children and their parents. Rather, the children and parents must be engaged in the co-creation of learning programs. Such engagement is dependent on a paradigm shift that calls for sustained, co-creative public work and critical reflection by a diverse group of people, including children.*

*Transforming cultures requires that people take on new roles and see themselves in expanded ways. To help people develop identities as co-creators rather than observers and consumers, leadership development and creative experimentation among all participants are key...[And] when learning*

*is tied to larger issues affecting our collective lives it takes on added meaning and purpose that motivates change at multiple levels.<sup>13</sup>*

## NLC creations and innovations

With support from a four-year Wallace Foundation grant that began in 2002, the NLC embarked on experimentation, coordination, reflection and evaluation on a larger scale. A **Coordinating Council** was formed with the dual purpose of coordinating NLC activities and providing reflective leadership development for members. The Council meets twice a month -- once for nuts-and-bolts planning and coordination, and once for reflective leadership development – and holds semi-annual retreats for more extended visioning, discussion of lessons learned, and to deepen working relationships.

A staff position of **Community Connector** was created in 2002. Housed at WSCO, the Connector’s role is to build relationships with individuals and organizations and to discover where informal learning is currently going on, who might contribute to new learning opportunities, and how resources and leadership for neighborhood learning might better connect.

Two additional innovations that began in 2002 were the **Mini-Grant Program** and the **West Side Teachers Institute**. The Mini-Grant Program, operated by a community-led committee, proved highly effective at expanding the NLC’s network of people and organizations actively committed to creating a neighborhood culture of learning. Grants from \$50 to \$1,500 were available to individuals – parents, youth, teachers, other residents – and institutions to encourage diverse leadership of learning opportunities and to underwrite the costs of leading informal learning. Mini-grant recipients participated in reflective evaluation sessions to foster cross-learning and leadership development. It was an important strategy to highlight and generate new learning.

The West Side Teachers Institute began as a program through which teachers in West Side schools could



who ride the Circulator have access to a larger number of opportunities, and organizations can use the Circulator to collaborate around youth programming. Some sites, such as the library, have seen a sharp increase in the number of children who come to their site because they now have transportation.

Inspired by the desires of West Side teens, the **West Side Youth Apprenticeship Project (YAP)** began in the summer of 2003. YAP provides West Side youth with a paid apprenticeship at one of an array of West Side community organizations and businesses. Apprentice learning is bolstered by weekly leadership development workshops that allow youth to consider careers in terms of its larger significance and importance in the world.

In the fall of 2003, the NLC organized the first in a series of **West Side Learning Conferences**. These are professional development and networking opportunities for local agency staff, youth, parents and neighborhood leaders. A small number of funders and policy-makers (school board members, Metropolitan Council staff and foundation officers) are invited to participate as part of the NLC's strategy to build pathways for change on a larger scale. Held three times per year on selected topics such as "Building Community Capacity through Partnership" or "Using Data to Empower Our Community," conferences generally bring 50-75 stakeholders together for conversation, critical reflection and neighborhood planning. A

increase their capacity to form school-community partnerships, conduct community-based learning projects with their students, and explore the public and community dimensions of their vocation as teachers. In 2004, eligibility was broadened so that community-based educators – leaders of informal learning opportunities for children and youth in the neighborhood – participated along with school teachers. This allowed a stronger focus on developing "citizen teachers" and on building bridges between educators inside the schools and those active elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Other innovations began to hatch. In 2003, through the joint efforts of parents, 17 youth-serving community organizations, the **West Side Circulator** began operation. This is a free bus that provides transportation among learning sites and public places in the neighborhood. Over 6,300 rides were taken on the Circulator during the first summer. Children and youth

**"Youth who ride the Circulator have access to a larger number of learning opportunities. Organizations begin to see that they can use the circulator to collaborate around youth programming."**

keynote speaker and small group discussions are usually followed by a "Taking Action" segment where participants identify concrete steps to move an aspect or strategy of NLC work forward. Learning Conferences provide a space for strengthening the involvement and ownership of more NLC stakeholders beyond those on the Coordinating Council.

The success of the Circulator in 2003 resulted in deeper discussions among youth-focused organizations and parents on what genuine collaboration for youth development could look like. Out of these discussions, **All-Around-the-Neighborhood** (AATN) was created in 2004 as a summer day camp. Children participate in nine weeklong sessions, each with a different theme highlighting contributions from diverse people, cultures, and places in the neighborhood. The camps operate in six different locations in the neighborhood, connected by the Circulator. Camps are led by community teachers (mostly parents and other West Side residents) who design their sessions around a set of learning goals consistent with their camp's theme. In 2005, AATN expanded to year-round programming with learning activities during school release days and after school.

### Essential features of the NLC approach

All of the above innovations incorporate five essential features of the Neighborhood Learning Community approach:

#### Alert to diverse talents

The NLC holds an appreciation for the gifts that each person contributes through productive, creative labors that help make a community alive with learning. Everyone (children and adults) is seen as capable of teaching, mentoring, leading, creating, and building to enrich the community. Every organization is seen as a potential contributor. Much of the work of the NLC, certainly of the Community Connector, involves surfacing, mobilizing and coordinating these assets – finding various productive talents in the community and inviting and challenging people to contribute to the whole.

#### Learning-focused

The NLC focuses on the learning of children and adults at all times. This goal is equal to, or more important than, task accomplishment, administrative efficiency or other goals that often dominate human interaction and activity. This focus on learning helps account for the many opportunities for reflection and public evaluation embedded in the work. Children



constantly ask themselves and each other, “What are we learning?” and “What difference does it make?” The NLC’s learning focus makes it an emergent, evolving, dynamic approach. People expect to know, see, understand more tomorrow than today. In the NLC, freedom, creativity and surprise are nurtured and celebrated, because they are correlates of learning.

#### Collaborative and relational

The NLC promotes and practices collaboration and relationship-building among individuals and among institutions. While many experts and models emphasize collaboration these days, what is important about the NLC’s approach is its grounding in life-long learning and public work. Relationships are seen as a source of collective power and infuse the work with possibility because of the expansive (rather than restrictive) contributions from many. Collaboration thrives

because of an appreciation for others' gifts, productive labors, and a joy in seeing others develop. People don't collaborate only on small matters; people collaborate because they want to affect an entire neighborhood, system, realm of policy, or way of thinking. Local public work functions as an incubator where people develop practical political skills. One of its outcomes is a gradually expanding number of people who want to and can engage effectively in larger systems change.

**“The NLC is a place-based approach to learning and civic life. Learning starts where people are, literally and metaphorically.”**

### **Engaged with big questions and ideas**

Children and adults have the desire and the right to lead lives of meaning and purpose. They want to be part of something larger than their individual selves, and to impact the most pressing issues of their times. This is the vital antidote to the lonely isolation that so many people experience in today's consumer-oriented mass culture. This is what re-members and re-connects community. The NLC realizes that working on large issues that matter to the community-nation-world is not only exciting, but vital to a healthy democracy. Contributing to national discourse on education reform and policy; taking up the work of democracy, of community revitalization, of the commonwealth, is uplifting and ennobling. It infuses life with meaning and purpose. It expands the people who engage in that work. As they feel its importance, they feel their own importance for contributing to it.

### **Rooted in place**

Everything that the NLC does is anchored in the West Side neighborhood. The NLC is a place-based approach to learning and civic life. Learning starts where people are, literally and metaphorically. Children's learning opportunities focus on the people, places and institutions of the West Side neighborhood. Civic identity, too, is rooted in a particular place. Once our people lived in the highlands of Southeast Asia, or the horn of Africa, or they came from Europe and made homesteads on the prairie; now we live here

in the U.S.A., in Minnesota, here in St. Paul, on the West Side. If we want to change our world, or create a better one, let us start here, where we are, with these resources and these institutions. Let us be makers of history, adding our voice to the song of this place.

### **Looking to the future**

Since about 2003, NLC efforts have begun spreading out of the neighborhood through deepened engagement with institutional systems that reach city or region-wide. As staff and decision-makers in these systems – schools, parks, neighborhood development, regional planning, youth-serving organizations, philanthropy, even agriculture agencies – participate in community-based learning and innovation on the West Side, there has been increasing interest in the NLC philosophy and method. A growing number of institutional leaders have begun to explore how this approach might be integrated in other parts of their system and in other neighborhoods.

In an era of restricted budgets for schools and other public institutions, the NLC is demonstrating a way to surface and mobilize the human and social resources found in neighborhoods, many outside the formal bounds of specific institutions. By engaging youth and adults in public work, the NLC provides a venue through which community members can bring out the best in public agencies. Rather than let them drift or ossify, detached from community ideas and accountability, the NLC fosters lively, co-creative partnerships that draw forth creative public spirit from these institutions.



# THE NLC IN ACTION: TWO CASE STUDIES

Two learning projects generated by the Neighborhood Learning Community vividly illustrate the five essential NLC features: the Youth Apprenticeship Project and All Around the Neighborhood.

## Youth Apprenticeship Project

### Purpose:

- To provide a challenging learning experience that utilizes and expands youth's contribution and connection to community.
- To build the skills that increase success and confidence in the workplace.
- To engage young people's curiosities about work and community; to explore vocation.
- To increase the number of supportive adult relationships youth have.

During a typical summer on St. Paul's West Side, it is not unusual to see a fifteen year old perched behind a desk at the local neighborhood association calling organizations to set up voter participation workshops. Stop by the library and it just may be a young person who checks out your book on French cooking and during your quick jog into the neighborhood's popular coffee house a young woman learning about a career in small business might be the one who makes your latte. These young people are passionate and excited about what they are doing in their neighborhood, and while they make important contributions to the work of over twelve different organizations and businesses, they are all connected through the West Side Youth Apprenticeship Project (YAP).

YAP was imagined by a group of teens in a West Side public housing complex who were active in urban 4-H. They had been meeting in their community weekly to design and lead daylong learning opportunities for younger children during school release days. They were honing their public speaking skills, creating curricula and engaging a group of little ones in fun

and learning at the same time. When adults in the Neighborhood Learning Community asked these teens what they would create together if given the chance, the teens said they were ready for the next step: they really wanted paid jobs.

These teens were not talking about jobs at a fast food restaurant. They wanted to be recognized and validated for the important contributions they were making to their community. Moreover, they wanted to explore careers they might pursue after high school, learn about work cultures and develop workplace skills. With guidance from the young people, adult leaders used the growing NLC network to plan and launch the West Side Youth Apprenticeship Project in the summer of 2003.

### Program components

Leaders in the Neighborhood Learning Community know youth employment opportunities are extremely important for successful transition to adulthood. However existing models are too limited. Most programs are created to provide young people (often designated as having barriers to employment) with basic job readiness skills to ensure economic self-sufficiency. These programs focus on placing young

**“The creators of the Youth Apprenticeship Project started with the recognition that teens have talents, energy, and imagination to contribute to the community.”**

people somewhere, anywhere, and the developmental components often go no further than showing up on time in appropriate work attire.

The creators of the Youth Apprenticeship Project started with the recognition that teens, whether they live in public housing or middle class homes, have talents and energy and imagination to contribute to the community. They want the summer job program to be learning-focused and relational in nature; to be rich with mentoring adult relationships. They want to ensure that young people are successful in workplace settings *and* to encourage young people's curiosities about the world and the workplace. They want teens to become lifelong learners and active citizens; always

asking questions and thinking about how they can improve the places where they live and work; they work to encourage young people to explore how work impacts the local community and broader world. Thus YAP taps the desire and ability of young people to make valuable and serious contributions to the West Side.

Drawing from youth development and public work theory, leaders in the NLC know that young people need supportive, mentoring relationships with numerous adults. They need to be challenged; they want opportunities to try on adult roles, to be responsible and depended upon.<sup>14</sup> These features were built into the program design.

**“YAP taps the desire and ability of young people to make valuable and serious contributions to the West Side.”**

Each summer, approximately twenty-five teens spend ten weeks working with a mentor at a West Side organization or business. In addition to working with a mentor, youth apprentices meet weekly for a three-hour leadership development seminar called the “Thursday staff meeting.” Led by adult coaches from the neighborhood, staff meetings allow apprentices to create learning goals for the summer, to work through challenges at their worksite, and to articulate lessons they are learning through their apprenticeships. YAP’s designers also intend for young people to explore the civic dimensions of work in order to thread together their *work* and *civic* identities.

Each year, YAP activities are connected by a unifying theme, such as: “Human Rights on the West Side and in the World” in 2004 and “Race, Culture and Identity” in 2005. For the 2005 theme, apprentices conducted oral histories with a diverse array of West Side residents including family members. Through these interviews, stories of immigration and culture in the neighborhood were collected. Each apprentice created a literal or figurative self-portrait which became part of an exhibit at the Minnesota Children’s Museum.

An advisory council of past youth apprentices, mentors, and parents plan for the coming summer’s apprenticeships. At an application seminar, youth interested in an apprenticeship meet with YAP staff and identify two apprenticeship sites that best fit their interests and goals. This seminar also supports teens through the application process by offering resume writing and interview skill workshops. Applicants hired as apprentices attend a kick-off retreat in early June where they explore the concept of vocation and begin teambuilding.

YAP focuses not only on apprentices’ learning and contribution, but also on that of mentors, parents, and coaches. All are seen as contributors and learners. Prior to the start of the apprenticeships, mentors meet to discuss their role.

To build stronger relationships within what one coach referred to as the “YAP family,” apprentices, their parents and families, mentors and coaches all gather for a mid-summer social. Here parents learn about the contributions their child has made through their work. Parents also share what they value most about the apprenticeship experience. This is an important access point for interested parents who may later join the advisory council. It builds connections and makes young people’s work visible and celebrated by a range of adults. Additionally, apprentices plan an end of summer celebration, which includes presentations of their work, an awards ceremony and family events.

Apprentices participate in ongoing reflection through site visits, weekly journals and Thursday staff meetings. In staff meetings apprentices discuss neighborhood issues and the importance of the community as a place of civic learning.

**“In staff meetings, apprentices discuss neighborhood issues and the importance of the community as a place of civic learning.”**

## Youth learning

Apprentices set learning goals for themselves at the beginning of each summer. Apprentices' goals fall into three areas of learning:

- 1) specific workplace and technical skills e.g. improve typing skills, learn to use a fax machine, be able to fill out a job application;
- 2) topic-related goals e.g. youth development, garden design and layout, West Side cultural history; and
- 3) social and emotional development e.g. gain confidence, develop patience, manage conflict.

All participants evaluated their success in meeting 121 learning goals to date. They reported that 96% of their goals were either totally or somewhat met. Data is also collected through interviews and focus groups with youth apprentices, parents, mentors and coaches.

Interviews provide important insights into the development of individual youth. One young man discusses how he overcame a fear of public speaking while planning a community festival:

*“When I first started at Jane Addams School I was really shy. Now I see how things get planned. And I know I have power to do what I want. I’ve learned that it’s not easy to plan a Community Festival! When you just go to them you don’t see it. But when you plan it, you have to figure out things like who to invite as speakers, how to get people to come, and how to organize the fashion show. It’s more work than you’d think! I got to do public speaking at the Freedom Festival, and I feel more comfortable talking in front of others now.”*

Kong’s reflection on his own accomplishments acknowledges recognition of a new public role for him.

After reflecting on his work experience, another young man commented, “In this job a lot of kids looked up to me. I set a good example.” A young woman shared, “I’m 14...and I’m working hard. I’ve learned I can contribute just as much as someone older. And it means a lot that I’m doing good work in my community!” A third example takes another angle. In this case the young man had just moved to the neighborhood from a rural area and initially experienced the neighborhood as a threatening place, particularly regarding its ethnic diversity. At the conclusion of the experience, he told us, “I’ve learned to work with a lot of diversity: diversity in tools, diversity in people, and diversity in projects. I’ve also learned to be more self sufficient, self-disciplined, and be able to set up my own schedule, to try and plan in advance.”

Most mentors confirmed apprentices’ growing confidence in their work roles. One mentor said the following about her apprentice, “She’s getting better and better at making phone calls and explaining her project to people she has never met. She’s interviewed many different people. I can see the change in her skill level.” Through YAP, young people reported not only developing technical workplace skills, but also learning how to navigate and fit into workplace cultures. As research on youth development shows, these types of experiences equip youth to successfully take on adult roles.

YAP also creates a space where young people can make real contributions to the neighborhood and think critically about the importance of their various workplaces to the community. Because this was a strong theme and focus of conversation with adults and youth, by the end of the summer almost all apprentices were able to explain how their work contributed to the West Side. One young man working at El Rio Vista Recreation Center said:

*I didn’t understand what we need a rec center for when I first started. I thought people just played sports here. Now I understand that it’s way more. Lots of kids’ parents can’t help them with their homework, so they can get help here. Lots of kids don’t have computers at home, so they can use the computers here. It’s really important that kids have somewhere to come.*

Another apprentice working with a neighborhood lawyer and the West Side Citizens Organization delved into the topic of restorative justice and community circles. She interviewed many people – both those who supported the idea and those who felt they were ineffective. “I learned that restorative justice is a way to make communities whole – it’s about restoring communities when things have gone wrong,” she said. She concluded that not only was a restorative justice approach potentially beneficial to neighborhoods, it could also work as an alternative to disciplinary policies at school.

The West Side Youth Apprenticeship Project illustrates how the five core principles of the NLC – alert to everyone’s gifts, learning-focused, collaborative and relational, engaged in large ideas, and rooted in place – can be put in action in a developmental program for teens. YAP not only provides a space in which youth can learn, contribute, and develop identities of

through their work. YAP awakens the democratic sensibilities in people, helping them become connected to one another, conscious of the larger neighborhood, and alert to the diverse gifts and responsibilities carried by neighborhood members. Mentors, too, exercise their collaborative problem solving skills. They name, claim and reflect on their learning through the process.

### All-Around-The-Neighborhood

**Purpose:**

To organize a coordinated neighborhood-based, out-of-school initiative led by parents, youth, community education, and staff of community organizations to create a West Side alive with learning.



All-Around-the-Neighborhood (AATN) is a learning program that invites children ages six to twelve, older youth, and adults to explore the entire West Side neighborhood as a living classroom. An AATN community teacher told how children’s learning happens through everyday encounters on the West Side:

*We spent about 30 minutes everyday walking through the neighborhood....We came across an older man patching the sidewalk. He explained...why he was patching and how he prepared the concrete. Another experience we had was talking with a Hispanic woman working in her garden....I think the experience of connecting with people made the community real to them. Had they come across wet concrete, they might otherwise have put their finger in it...Instead they had had a*

*conversation with a real person. We walked by another yard that had a barking dog...One boy was deathly afraid, thinking the dog might eat him. Some of the other kids explained that*

responsible, active citizens of the community, YAP knits the neighborhood together through the relationships among mentors, parents, coaches, apprentices and the members of the neighborhood with whom they interact

*if you stay away, dogs usually won't hurt you, and dogs would never eat you. Having the kids explain to the boy -- helping him deal with his fear -- was an experience they never would have had in a classroom.<sup>16</sup>*

As this story illustrates, AATN uncovers the rich learning potential in everyday neighborhood occurrences. Everyone, from the man patching concrete to the kids who know about dogs to the lady working in her garden, can be a teacher. When children are connected through relationships with each other and older members of the community, and when their neighborhood is recognized as a learning laboratory, learning happens along many pathways.

**“When children are connected through relationships with each other and older members of the community, and when their neighborhood is recognized as a learning laboratory, learning happens along many pathways.”**

AATN is grounded in children's learning, but it also offers adults an opportunity to learn more powerful ways of collaboration. Neighborhood organizations, youth-serving agencies, parents and residents collaborate around a vision that's bigger than any single institution. Building on the success of the West Side Circulator in 2003, organizations and residents imagined a dramatically different way to work together. One mother and Girl Scout troop leader commented:

*The success of the Circulator let the group experience a new way to work together. We continued to discuss what it really means to collaborate around youth programming. We refocused on the shared value of parent and youth leadership and involvement lived out by the Family Center, Community Ed and the NLC. We asked ourselves what we really needed for our children and out of this came the design for All Around the Neighborhood.<sup>17</sup>*

As children and adults try on expanded roles, and spend time in more corners of the neighborhood, they gain an expanded sense of self and their own capabilities; they develop a more grounded knowledge of the neighborhood they both live in and contribute to.

## Program components

During the winter of 2004, West Side parents, residents, and representatives from 14 collaborating organizations sat down together to design All Around the Neighborhood. Many summer programs are designed to provide safe environments where children can have fun, keep busy and be safe. The planning group for AATN wanted to expand this list to focus on learning and designed AATN to have mixed age groupings and an emphasis on community participation and relationship building. They knew that such a design enhances children's socialization and self-awareness skills while the children build ties to their community.

All-Around the Neighborhood features nine weeklong camps that meet from noon to five daily. Each camp has a unique learning theme. Children wrangle with tarps and ropes while building new architectural inventions at Baker Recreation Center. They express the feeling associated with a recent thunder storm through “boom boom art”; they create their own restaurant, waiters and all, at a local high school; and they discover what happens when you mix oil and water at the Girl Scouts. Children rotate through the nine weekly camps in three groups of 20-30 children. Each group is accompanied by two adult group leaders who work with the same group of children all summer.

These diverse and creative learning topics are proposed by parents and community residents who contribute to AATN as community teachers. While the community teachers are not certified professional educators, they are important adult mentors with a desire to share their interests and passions with neighborhood children. The AATN planning team intentionally recognizes that everyone in the community has gifts and can act both as a teacher and a learner.

In 2005, AATN expanded to offer learning opportunities during the fall, winter and spring. Day camps are organized for school release days and “neighbor camps” engage smaller groups of children

after school in community teachers' homes or other community locations. Neighbor camps reflect the NLC's commitment to recognize and mobilize all the assets of the neighborhood and provide a point of entry for emerging community teachers and leaders.

In the Spring of 2005, a series of workshops were offered to help community teachers and group leaders create curriculum and share educational philosophy. The workshops drew on ideas about democratic,

**“Reggio-inspired education encourages children’s inquiry and experimentation, and it documents the learning process in such a way that learning becomes visible to children and adults.”**

child-centered learning and facilitation strategies pioneered in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy. Reggio-inspired education encourages children’s inquiry and experimentation, and it documents the learning process in such a way that learning becomes visible to children and adults. AATN planners worked with the Minnesota Children’s Museum and members of the regional Reggio educators’ network to design these workshops. The Reggio-inspired work of children in AATN was featured in an exhibit at the Minnesota Children’s Museum in the winter of 2006.

## Learning

Similar to the qualitative methods used to evaluate the West Side Youth Apprenticeship Project, AATN stakeholders share what they learned in individual interviews, focus groups, and written surveys. Children describe their learning in terms of “doing,” “making,” “building,” “playing.” They like things that move along, and they stay engaged when teachers adapt projects to allow them to pursue their interests.

A neighborhood dad and AATN community teacher created a curriculum for a Natural Engineering and Fort Building camp. He commented:

*Certainly there was nothing stopping [the children] from [building forts and bridges] before the class or after. But when they're presented with materials close at hand and someone says go and build something interesting, they have license and authority to do that....If someone assumes you can do something and you figure it out, the next time you will have this as a reservoir of confidence for other projects in different circumstances.... Some kids were successful, others failed for a while then went on to something else. It was a quicker form of trial and error; take a stick, put it here, that doesn't work, then tape it up a different way....I learned that children will come up with solutions even though they weren't the ones I would have come up with....It is better for them to come up with their own solutions than to look to mine.*

Another community teacher who lives in the neighborhood introduced children to the sciences in ways that provoked their natural curiosities. One mother reported, “When I came to pick [the kids] up, they were bursting to tell me all the things they learned. I treasured my youngest proudly yelling from the back seat that the brains of mummies are taken out through their noses!”<sup>18</sup> In 2005, a community teacher shared what children learn when they are





*sees people she met through the summer program...That's exciting for her. It really does build a sense of community.<sup>19</sup>*

In addition to these benefits for participating children, AATN is a leadership development opportunity for adults who work with the children. As children and adult leaders speak about what they learn, it becomes clear that AATN creates a multi-layered learning environment for everyone who participates. The project coordinator reflected in late 2004:

*The thing that has come out most clearly in the evaluation is that the camps were not just about the kids, but the adults and the community.*

*We created an environment for all of us to build capacity. Community teachers learned about how organizations worked. Organization staff learned how to work with neighborhood leaders. I thought this was a strong point. What helped me come to this conclusion was how much I learned myself.<sup>20</sup>*

encouraged to be curious, to experiment, and to claim their own learning,

*I tried to take chemistry down to a fundamental level so that [the children] were experiencing really basic concepts of chemistry ... we talked about wondering why as the first step in science. [One girl] wondered what would happen if she froze her miscibility experiment [an experiment to show what happens when you mix oil with water].... The water froze and the oil didn't....The fact that she went home and extended her investigation was great!"*

In addition to theme-based learning, children grew more familiar with people and places in the neighborhood. The mother who teaches science camps reported the following changes in participating children including her own daughter:

*Now I see kids in the neighborhood, riding their bikes. They know me and give huge waves. It's really exciting for kids to know adults in a community, to feel comfortable with a lot of adults. [My daughter] tells me how she gets off the circulator by the WSCO office, which is [in another] part of the neighborhood. She*

One important aspect of AATN is the space it provides for a new kind of collaboration among agency staff, parents and residents. Often, competition for funding resources and for participants in programs generates turf battles among organizations. This has been the experience among many non-profits on the West Side. However, West Side organizations are willing to work together on AATN for several reasons:

- AATN is co-created, rather than developed or owned by any one group.
- It builds on a highly visible and successful collaborative effort to launch the West Side circulator in 2003.
- People were able to think about their work not only in terms of their organization's mission, but also in a larger neighborhood context.



When the planning group gathered to talk about what might be created in 2004, no one person or organization had a blue print. Representatives from organizations helped to create the vision. They were encouraged to talk about their group's self interests and to state what each organization might contribute to a shared summer venture. As plans emerged, it became clearer how involvement in AATN could also contribute to the goals and missions of the collaborating organizations. This was not always obvious in the beginning, and some planners had to figure out how to make the case for involvement to their organization. One planner explained:

*It was difficult at first to figure out how my organization could work it out as a partner organization. All of our programs are fee for service, and until recently we have not worked with grants....There were no fees coming in to cover costs. To complicate matters, AATN began only as an idea, somewhat abstract at that. In the beginning, no one really knew*

*whether it could be pulled off or not. Despite the risk, however, we found a way to work things out so we could participate as a partner.<sup>21</sup>*

In the end, no group contributed without getting something in return. Organizations contributed different resources, including space for the camps, supplies and materials, staff and volunteers. All of these elements contribute to the co-creation of AATN. Thus all collaborators can claim the results. Several parents were involved in the collaborative planning process which allows for deeper conversation about the importance of flexibility in engaging parents' support and participation. In the end, planners agree that acting on this value of flexibility contributes to a different kind of partnership with parents. Said one group leader:

*You have to be flexible if these kinds of programs are to work. Parents were more involved than I had imagined. They saw how it benefited their kids. They volunteered; they offered to help, to share materials. It was amazing.*

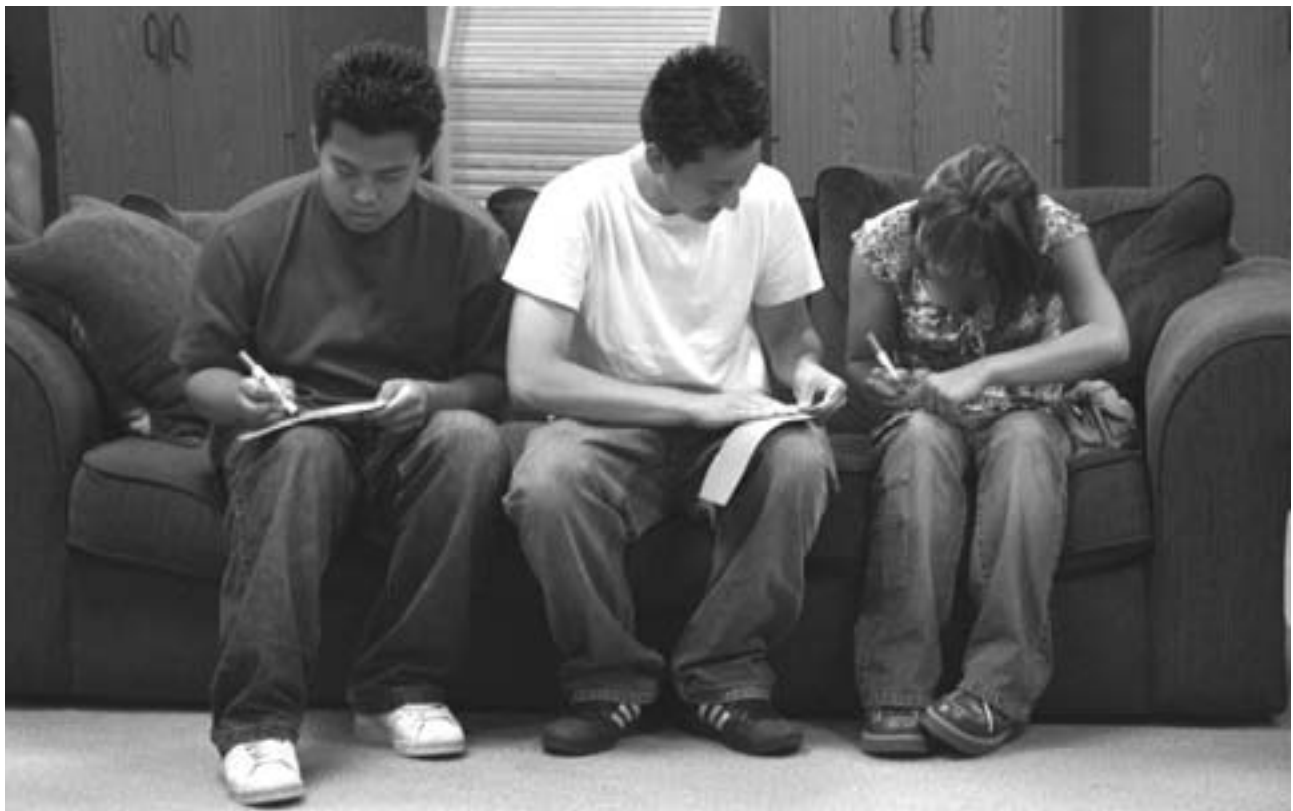
*Last year when I worked with youth, I never even saw a parent, unless their kids were in trouble...It happened here because we were creating opportunities in which we could see strengths of kids and parents.*

Participants also said that the large neighborhood vision and purpose – to create a community alive with learning; to create a neighborhood culture of learning – helped propel the work.

**“All-Around-the-Neighborhood shows the power of an approach to learning that is strongly rooted in place. The large neighborhood vision and purpose, to create a neighborhood culture of learning, helped propel the work.”**

The Neighborhood Learning Community’s willingness to engage with large ideas shines through the All-Around-the-Neighborhood story. Interagency collaboration, authentic partnerships between parents and youth professionals: these are longstanding and thorny problems in social policy. AATN did not shy away from naming and grappling with them.

In summary, All-Around-the-Neighborhood shows the power of an approach to learning that is strongly rooted in place, ambitious and imaginative in its ideas, based in collaboration and relationships, dedicated to learning gains for all participants, and alert to the gifts that all people and organizations whether professional or resident, child or adult, can contribute.





# CHALLENGES AND BEYOND

Three formidable but not insurmountable challenges face neighborhoods working to improve education inside and outside of schools.

## ***Fragmentation and duplication of out-of-school programming***

The reality of shrinking resources – both public and private – to support family and social services over the last decade has unleashed a competitive dynamic among nonprofit organizations that runs counter to community building efforts. This dynamic is multi-layered and complicated, involving many players, including foundations whose guidelines and funding patterns influence interactions among nonprofits that depend upon their support. In neighborhoods where many social service organizations are located, the competition for dollars and numbers of clients can be fierce. In such competitive environments, organizations build metaphorical fences around programs, claiming the participants as “theirs,” thus creating barriers to meaningful collaboration.

Resistance to coordinating and pooling resources has real effects in neighborhoods. The resulting duplication and fragmentation of youth programming can create unintentional gaps – excluding certain age groups or offering uneven programming. Competition complicates problem solving, money and time are wasted when groups do not work together to address common issues like transportation. In sum, competition among organizations precludes thoughtful use of limited resources that otherwise could achieve greater impact.

## ***Lack of connections between formal and informal learning***

The disconnection of schools from neighborhoods has an enormous impact on children’s learning and constrains resources that might otherwise enrich and expand learning. Multiple barriers exist – some are attitudinal, some structural, others are cultural. For instance, school choice allows children to enroll in schools away from their neighborhoods. An external demand for accountability measured through

benchmark tests narrows rather than expands learning opportunities, leaving little time for teachers to explore neighborhood resources. Many think about learning as happening inside schools – a mindset that limits imaginative approaches to education of children.

Neighborhood and school settings illustrate two strikingly different cultures that can be difficult to traverse. K-12 school systems are bureaucracies, with layers of policies and regulations to ensure accountability and standardization, while informal

**“Resistance to coordinating and pooling resources has real effects in neighborhoods. The resulting duplication and fragmentation of youth programming can create unintentional gaps.”**

education allows for more flexible, organic approaches with multiple chances for experimentation. In formal settings, teachers are credentialed, schooled in approved pedagogy and techniques. In neighborhood environments, parents, adults, and youth, teach each other without professional certification, and children and youth often co-design their learning opportunities. Few incentives exist within the school system to build co-creative partnerships with people who are not professional educators. Further, those outside expert cultures do not easily understand terminology used by those inside. These and other factors help explain what some perceive as the “walling off” of schools from neighborhoods in which they locate.

Both settings are important to life long learning. Those who would build partnerships across these divides must be extraordinarily bi-cultural and agile and they must possess great stamina and political savvy.

## ***Nonalignment of systems that impact neighborhoods***

The disconnection of neighborhoods from the systems intended to support them – further complicates community efforts. The lack of coordination among city-wide systems intended to support children’s learning outside of school, like the library, parks and recreation, and transportation systems, is damaging to neighborhoods. Competition and the



***Orient public policy to strengthen neighborhood civic life***

The overall policy design and infrastructure to support children’s learning within their neighborhoods must be one that renews the Minnesota tradition represented by community education, early childhood family education, and other policy innovations. They must tie education to civic life. Policy designed in this way facilitates easier navigation by neighborhood residents and encourages skill development and relationship building across cultural barriers. Policies can support diverse learning resources, and encourage coordination, integration and communication between and among parks and recreation, libraries, public schools, transportation, and neighborhood residents. It will take time, skill and vision for

lack of communication among city agencies which tend to operate in isolated silos, creates unnecessary obstacles, including a labyrinth-like network not easily navigated by citizens. Each of these large agencies hold resources that could be better used if coordinated, but too often decisions that impact communities are made at the central office, beyond the reach of parents and others involved in local community change. These structural problems must be addressed to ensure public participation in local decision making and to avoid inadvertent weakening of neighborhoods.

neighborhoods and diverse city agencies to design new policies that work to shape a system that taps talents and learning contributions of diverse actors. However, in our experience, this is work people want to do. With citizen involvement, we can build power and create the public outcomes that will bring our city to a new day.

***Build pathways between schools and neighborhoods***

The trend toward centralization has many ramifications for neighborhoods. As public agencies confronted with budget cuts have decreased the number of locally based people, communities lose necessary connective tissue. The loss of public servants, who see themselves as part of the neighborhood and who have long-term relationships with youth and parents over many years, only exacerbates the problem of disconnection.

**Moving Forward**

Four key strategies hold promise to address these complex, interrelated challenges. Each requires building democratic power and political acumen. People who engage in this work can develop a sense of civic agency and confidence that by working together, people can bring about change.

Community education, a leading example of civically oriented public education policy embedded within school districts, continues to hold great potential to serve as a bridge between K-12 schools and neighborhoods. With its mission to work with communities to promote life long learning, community education is organized differently than K-12 schools. Familiar to people involved in informal learning, community education offers infrastructure support and access to neighborhood residents and serves an important role to establish pathways between schools and neighborhoods. Other strategies also prove successful: increase access to school buildings for community purposes; orient teachers to neighborhood resources; create concrete projects that require community teachers and school teachers to work together. Together these strategies will extend and support children’s learning. Also, forging connections between schools and neighborhoods will expand resources and

help develop the expectation that the responsibility for society's children belongs to all of us.

### ***Promote collaboration for neighborhood improvement***

Strong collaborations (true collaborations) generate power. Public relationships form the basis of productive collaborations. It takes political skill to help diverse, often competitive organizations build public relationships. Start small. Work on a common project with tangible, public results. Make learning visible. Integrate civic engagement skill development in staff in-service and pre-service experiences, both in schools and in other institutions. Momentum grows as people grow resources and see results. With sustained work, nonprofit organizations can realize their civic missions in much deeper ways.

### ***Develop leadership that facilitates public action***

Underlying all of these approaches is the development of bold, confident citizens with capacity for public-spirited cooperative action. Additionally, public leaders must cultivate the skills to facilitate such cooperative efforts. Public action and leadership through formal and informal settings was once a central dynamic in Minnesota's educational success. Such civic action and leadership inspired Richard Green's famous vision of schools as "the new community commons." This vision was based on his experiences in the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement in Minneapolis, where he was educated and challenged by community leaders.<sup>22</sup> In a rapidly changing information age, it is more important than ever for institutions and community settings to foster skills, habits, and attitudes of public action and public leadership.

Each of the strategies described above have contributed to strengthening and sustaining the Neighborhood Learning Community. Financial support, while modest in terms of the scope of the effort's outcomes, has been essential. Grant funding has provided support for a full time Community Connector, stipends for youth apprentices, mini-grants for informal educational opportunities, a free transportation system for West Side residents, stipends for community teachers, funds for meetings, workshops and retreats. The greatest

share of the financial support for NLC work came from national and local foundations. A continuing challenge for the NLC and related efforts will be maintaining external funding streams long enough for new infrastructures to become self-sustained. NLC has been successful in part by recognizing that change happens incrementally over long periods of time. Substantial change has occurred on the West Side since 1996, but to sustain, maintain and continually build on that change, external funding must be a part of the effort.

**“A culture of learning encourages children to achieve their full potential and step fully into community life.”**

### **In closing**

As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our education system faces unprecedented pressures due to the demands of the global economy on the one hand and the rigid expectations of federal education policy (No Child Left Behind) on the other. In this context, the Neighborhood Learning Community offers an important approach to re-member, re-connect and mobilize the strengths for learning that can still be found within our neighborhoods.

The evidence is in: strong schools need strong communities, and strong communities can build strong schools. The NLC has learned how to create a community that is alive with learning.

The culture of learning on the West Side encourages children and adults to achieve their full educational potential and step fully into community life as creative, responsible citizens. The NLC has five years of experience in creating community-based learning opportunities and authentic collaboration among neighborhood institutions and families. As a result, the West Side Neighborhood Learning Community has built a pool of collaborative capacity, strong documentation, and talented leaders that make it a key resource for strategies to close the achievement gap, revitalize communities, and reinvigorate civic life throughout our region. When a community becomes intentionally re-connected like St. Paul's West Side has done in recent years, all kinds of amazing things can happen.

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- 14 Gambone, et al.
- 15 A total of 69 apprenticeships were filled in 2003-05 by these 54 youth. Three of the youth served for three years in a row, and nine others were apprentices in two of the three years.
- 16 Nan Skelton et al., *Neighborhood Learning Community Report to the Wallace Foundation*, "Evaluation Findings: All Around the Neighborhood Summer Camps", (Minneapolis, Center for Democracy and Citizenship, 2004) 34. (not published)
- 17 Ibid., 5-6.
- 18 Ibid., 31.
- 19 Ibid, p.34.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 35-36.
- 22 See for instance: Harry W. Davis, *Change Maker*, ed by Lori Sturtevant (Afton: Afton Historical Society Press, 2003).



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