



# Neighborhood Learning Community



A network of people and organizations working together

To strengthen learning on the West Side

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# What is the Neighborhood Learning Community?

The Neighborhood Learning Community is a network of people and organizations working together to strengthen learning on the West Side of St. Paul, Minnesota. The NLC aims to:

- Improve learning of young people by co-creating a neighborhood culture that promotes and values learning for everyone
- Develop the neighborhood's capacity to create and sustain informal learning
- Establish visible, well-used pathways between West Side schools and the neighborhood
- Build a campaign to influence the public agenda on learning

**More than just one program or place, the NLC is a network of people, organizations and learning opportunities throughout the West Side.**

**The NLC** encompasses many diverse learning opportunities for students and families both inside and outside of schools. This network includes 6 schools, over 30 community organizations, several parks, 4 gardens, a greenhouse and even a neighborhood bus!

**In fact, over 1,000 people have participated in NLC events and opportunities in 2004.**

**Participants** bridge four generations, five languages, and include both long-time community residents and new immigrants. Parents, grandparents, community organizers, youth workers, children, youth, teachers, social workers, and neighborhood leaders participate as teachers and learners.

These West Siders have joined together to create a variety of new learning projects, reflecting the interests of young people, neighborhood residents and community organizations -- many include multiple ages and organizations. Their collective work contributes to strengthening **Learning** in the neighborhood.

## **Our Story: A Community Learning Agenda**

The development of the NLC aligns with the West Side neighborhood's long history of community building. On April 25, 2001, leaders from the West Side Citizens Organization and the Jane Addams School for Democracy hosted a neighborhood Education Dialogue. Fifty residents and people who worked in the neighborhood gathered to talk about learning opportunities – what was available and what was needed. The outcome was a decision to launch a neighborhood wide effort to make learning the surround sound of the West Side. Participants identified five areas of interest and formed corresponding working groups: Intergenerational Learning; Language Learning and Literacy; Cultural Literacy; Environmental and Agricultural Learning; and Adults as Resources. By the end of the summer, the community planning process had begun. Groups developed project plans that would help shape the first years of the NLC.

# How Did We Begin?

The Neighborhood Learning Community originated in 2001 with the goal to improve learning for children and families on the West Side of St. Paul, MN. **The vision is bold:** we aim to create a neighborhood **culture of learning** to develop people's capacity to see themselves as contributing, creative members of their families, neighborhood, and more broadly, our society.

**The evidence is in: strong schools need strong neighborhoods. Strong neighborhoods need strong schools.**

## A Growing Research Base for Neighborhood Learning:

- A growing chorus of scholars, researchers and practitioners consistently confirms that family and community involvement increases student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2004).
- The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in its review of literature, concludes 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 (ASCD, 2003).
- Citing over 50 studies, Henderson and Mapp find a strong relationship between family support of children's learning and educational progress and children's ability to do well in school and continue their education (SEDL, 2004).
- A recent analysis of 56 studies of after-school and summer programs found a positive impact on student achievement in reading and mathematics (McREL, 2003). Beyond improving student achievement, Out-of-School-Time initiatives have been linked to improved school attendance, aspirations for the future and the "habits of mind" central to work and civic participation (Weiss, 2004).

## Our Story: Coordinating Resources for Neighborhood-Based Learning

In most cross-organizational collaborations, staff members come representing their own organization's interests. By adopting a broader neighborhood vision, people expand their frame of reference beyond organizational boundaries. Thus, people think less in terms of "my organization's kids" and more about coordinating resources for "the neighborhood's children." This expanded way of thinking helps liberate resources and generates new energy and creativity. For example, transportation is a long-standing resource issue for nonprofit organizations. In 2003, a group of neighborhood youth agencies received a grant to support summer transportation needs. Rather than dividing the money among organizations, they adopted a plan to support a West Side Circulator that kids and families could ride for free. The bus stopped at every agency and summer activity spot, circulating continuously every weekday. Organizations saved staff time; families had convenient access to transportation; and kids moved about the neighborhood with new freedom. This successful collaboration spurred planners to design an innovative, inter-organization summer neighborhood learning program for children in the following summer.

# Neighborhood Accomplishments

The Neighborhood Learning Community is not a fixed organization and does not run programs. Facilitated by a Coordinating Council, the NLC is a *network* of people and organizations committed to strengthening learning on the West Side. NLC leaders help broker resources, provide space and support for civic learning and leadership development, and connect people and organizations to generate ideas. Examples of projects promoted by the NLC include:

- **West Side Learning Conferences:** Young people, community residents, staff of local organizations, teachers, and city officials convene quarterly to shape a neighborhood agenda, generate new ideas, and reflect on lessons learned. Past themes include: leadership development, sharing resources through collaboration, and empowering neighborhoods through evaluation.
- **West Side Youth Apprenticeship Project:** Several young people and adults in the neighborhood concerned about civic learning and meaningful work generated interest for neighborhood apprenticeships. Adults who work in a variety of West Side organizations mentor paid teen apprentices to help them better understand work cultures, explore career options, and see their own work contributions in a larger civic context. In the summer of 2004, 16 adults and 27 young people participated. Evaluation findings show that young people develop stronger neighborhood connections, work skills, and public leadership through this opportunity (Rainbow Research, 2004).
- **Monday Night Live:** Parents and others work with community education to develop an intergenerational “family school” where all kinds of people can teach and learn, including non-native English speakers. Monday Night Live is especially important to children because they see their parents as teachers.
- **West Side Teachers’ Institute:** A cohort of youth workers and local high school teachers designed and implemented strategies to build bridges between the school and the neighborhood through a year-long seminar facilitated by neighborhood leaders and University of Minnesota staff.
- **West Side Circulator:** People in local organizations pool resources to support a neighborhood bus that connects children with summer learning opportunities throughout the neighborhood. The circulator is a visible metaphor that helps West Side organizations and residents connect the dots among learning sites and activities in the neighborhood.
- **All Around the Neighborhood Summer Camps:** Sixteen organizations contribute space, materials, and staff to implement an innovative summer program for children, showcasing the neighborhood as a living classroom. Neighborhood residents serve as teachers. Children engage with themes like ancient history, theater, civic leadership, sports and health, traveling to different sites via the circulator.
- **Neighborhood Mini-Grants:** In order to build greater levels of participation from different sectors of the community, the Coordinating Council operates a mini-grant process where neighborhood residents and organizations can apply for funding to implement learning projects in the neighborhood.

It's not just what we do; it's how we do it.

*How* the neighborhood comes together is as important as *what* it does. The NLC promotes a grass-roots process that opens spaces for diverse neighborhood residents to develop leadership and organize for change. It also facilitates learning among organizations to better understand and address the complexities of inter-organization collaboration.

# What We've Learned: Research and Evaluation

The NLC engages organizations, community residents and young people in a rigorous, critical process of data analysis, interpretation and utilization. After three full years of implementation, we have growing evidence that the model works. Levels of participation continue to climb, more people are stepping into leadership roles and collaboration among organizations widens and deepens.

## We've learned how to build a vital neighborhood for learning.

- **Build Community Collaboration**

The compelling vision and creative work generated by the NLC initiative has power to realign singular organizations around the expansive goal of neighborhood learning. Collaborative projects, such as the summer's "All Around the Neighborhood" camp, help youth workers think more in terms of coordinating resources for the neighborhood's children rather than children belonging to any one organization. Shifting the frame of reference leads to shared goals among organizations to improve neighborhood learning.

- **Develop Public Leadership**

People feel easily intimidated by an emphasis on experts, credentials, rules, and regulations found in most formal learning settings. Thus many parents and neighborhood residents, especially immigrants, do not see themselves as teachers nor do others view them as resources for learning. When parents have opportunities to develop as leaders, teachers and mentors, they increase their capacity to influence their children's education, and they begin to see themselves as active citizens – regardless of their legal status – with an ability to influence and contribute to their community.

- **Focus on Learning**

Evidence shows that when the focus is on learning, regardless of age or role played, everyone learns. We have seen that a learning framework shifts one-way relationships between community organizations and neighborhood residents to more reciprocal communication and shared work.

- **Pursue Systems Change**

We have learned that connections can be formed between and among learning opportunities and organizations in a neighborhood, but the systems that support neighborhood programs are located outside neighborhood. The "place" of decision making related to local organizations like the community library, schools or parks has shifted over time from neighborhood staff to administrators in central offices "downtown." Consequently, neighborhood residents often find their plans thwarted by decisions made at levels beyond their reach. To address this requires changing how these systems work.

- **Incorporate "place" as context for learning**

When the neighborhood becomes a site of learning, young people and children build relationships with a diverse group of people. They gain familiarity with the neighborhood's history, its physical places, and the people who live and work there. This context enhances motivation for learning and helps children and youth develop a sense of belonging to their place.

# Neighborhood Learning Agenda

It is clear from our evaluation data that people – from small children to college professors, from high school students to principals – are making things happen on the West Side. The Neighborhood Learning Community has facilitated a wide range of learning opportunities and co-created an increasingly shared neighborhood vision. Our challenge now is to sustain the neighborhood work and forge alignment with citywide systems. Decision-making authority in neighborhood-located institutions has shifted overtime from local branches to central offices. While many West Side neighborhood organizations have come together around common goals, staff members often find that decisions made “downtown” constrain their ability to collaborate fully.

## Strategies for the future

### **1. Launch a campaign to influence a city-wide public learning agenda**

Through this campaign we will influence governing bodies to place more value on community-based learning in neighborhoods by developing pathways and connections between neighborhoods and the city or school district.

### **2. Create and sustain neighborhood-based learning opportunities**

We will continue to involve a core group of organizations in order to ensure multiple learning opportunities exist and are supported.

### **3. Establish pathways between schools and neighborhoods to enrich learning**

Learning is strengthened when it is connected to lived experiences. Therefore, the NLC will assist schools in deepening and connecting student learning to the experiences, issues and resources in the neighborhood. Tactics include:

- Extend professional development opportunities for teachers and community educators
- Deepen and expand school curriculum
- Support and credential informal learning

### **4. Realign Systems to Support Neighborhoods**

Parents, community members and young people invest in schools when they know they have meaningful opportunities for participation. The structures and policies of city wide districts and boards should support meaningful opportunities for local engagement.