

**CREATING A CULTURE OF LEARNING IN ST. PAUL:  
A FRAMEWORK TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S LEARNING**

**A paper for the Kettering Foundation**

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*A Nation at Risk*, the seminal report issued in 1983 by the U.S. Department of Education, heightened national efforts to reform public education. Yet in its follow-up report written 25 years later, *A Nation Accountable*, the Department of Education asserted, "If we were 'at risk' in 1983, we are at even greater risk now."<sup>1</sup> What happened?

In the past 25 years, education reform has been school-centered and focused primarily on standards, testing, and teacher quality. In 2001, a bipartisan Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) enacting standards-based education reform measured by assessments developed in each state. Diane Ravitch, an influential education scholar and assistant secretary of education in the first Bush administration, was a strong supporter of the NCLB school reform launched by George W. Bush's administration. Nine years later she has reversed position. In her latest book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch concludes that NCLB strategies to improve schools such as standardized testing, charter schools, market choice, and accountability do not work. "I was known as a conservative advocate of many of these policies," says Ravitch. "But I've looked at the evidence and I've concluded they're wrong. They've put us on the wrong track," she said in an interview for National Public Radio.<sup>2</sup>

Many people express grave concern about the state of our country's education system. Yet as debate about school reform gains momentum with new proposals for *Race to the Top* funding opportunities and revision of NCLB, the buzz is focused on improving the education marketplace rather than recognizing education as a public good. It follows then that little attention is given to the potential role that citizens and communities can play in improving learning for children.

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education, *A Nation Accountable: Twenty-five Years After A Nation at Risk*, Washington, D.C., 2008. <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/accountable/>

<sup>2</sup> National Public Radio, Morning Edition, March 2, 1020, Interviewer, Steve Inskeep.

Our experience working with children and families in neighborhoods over the last 15 years underlines the critical role that dense social networks play in the support of learning inside and outside formal classrooms. If we assume that learning is consigned to institutions and occurs between seven and three o'clock Monday through Fridays, then we've identified both the problem and the resources far too narrowly. Education reform and neighborhood engagement ought not be separated. Schools alone cannot fix our current education problems.

In 1996, with others at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, we began work in St. Paul, Minnesota, to create a public space where diverse groups of ordinary people and professionals could work together to invent new approaches to education dilemmas commonly experienced by immigrant families. At what became the Jane Addams School for Democracy, we developed theories of change honed through reflective practice, learned new ways of doing democratic work, and taught ourselves how to cross cultural borders.

Nearly a decade ago, the Jane Addams School for Democracy, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, and several other community based organizations launched a neighborhood learning initiative on St. Paul's West Side. Our underlying assumption: when learning is visible and available throughout the neighborhood, and when many people of all ages are involved in teaching and learning, a *culture of learning* can be co-created to improve children's learning.<sup>3</sup> Several years later, in 2007, St. Paul's East Side neighborhood began to implement a similar neighborhood model with its own distinctive stamp.

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<sup>3</sup> The work of the NLC is based on the following theory of change: 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 engage in the co-creation of learning programs and experiences. 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 of co-creators rather than observers and consumers requires leadership development and creative experimentation among all participants. Finally, this theory proposes that when learning is tied to larger issues affecting our collective lives it takes on added meaning and civic purpose that motivates change at multiple levels.

## **A dynamic model of learning**

John Dewey and other progressive educators who followed make a clear distinction between “education” and “schooling.” Lawrence Cremin, an educational historian and student of Dewey, also argued for a holistic definition of education to be understood in ecological terms. Education, Cremin thought, should take into account a range of complex learning interactions that occur through what he called, “configurations of education.”<sup>4</sup> In this dynamic model, interaction among individual experience and background, broader social influences, institutions, technology and schooling, among other factors, all contribute to growth and learning. People of all ages learn in webs of non-school settings, Cremin argued, in libraries, museums, urban centers, factories, offices, social settings, through media and in neighborhoods. In these places, people encounter a variety of curricula and pedagogies—though they may not be named as such—constituting a rich array of learning resources and opportunities.

More than a decade of youth development research concludes that for young people to flourish, they need much more than academic skills. They also must learn to be productive contributors, to establish healthy relationships, to connect meaningfully with peers and adults, and to navigate the structures and opportunities their communities offer. Diane Ravitch warns, “By our current methods, we may be training (not educating) a generation of children who are repelled by learning, thinking that it means only drudgery, worksheets, test preparation and test-taking.”<sup>5</sup> Skills in communication, critical thinking, and problem solving are essential for young people, as are hope for the future and the belief that they can lead and contribute.<sup>6</sup> UNESCO considers redefinition of learning one of our most important imperatives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They emphasize essential learning as “learning to be,” “learning to do,” “learning to understand,” and “learning to live together.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Cremin, *Public Education* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976)

<sup>5</sup> Diane Ravitch, *Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 2010), 231.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Gambone, Adena Klem, and James Connell, *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*. (Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Learning: The Treasure Within, A Report to UNESCO of the International Commission for Education for the Twenty-First Century. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996: 20-21.

Ample research in the last decade confirms the need for partnerships between schools and community organizations, between parents and schools, and among community programs to promote children’s learning. National models like *Communities in Schools*<sup>8</sup> coordinate and connect needed community resources with children in their schools. However, programs that deliver services—“doing to” and “doing for” children—reinforce again the notion of education as a private good and do little to bridge “configurations of education” or address the development of skills described above.

Public work—sustained work of civic value, done over time with a mix of people to improve our common lives—is the only approach that will address these challenges. Public work demands that citizens—professionals such as teachers and youth workers, parents, and even young people—claim their responsibility for our shared resources. When citizens are engaged in community life and learning throughout a lifetime, their capacity to adapt to change and to assist in rebuilding communities grows. The democratic processes and products of public work will help to build the foundation for a different narrative of education for our society

### **Learning Communities**

The construct of “learning communities” put forth in the 1970s has reemerged globally as a strategy to organize resources, shift top-down power to democratic processes, and revitalize neighborhoods, cities and regions.<sup>9</sup> The United Kingdom and European countries have been leaders in this movement, raising the visibility of learning in cities and building supporting infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

The formation of learning communities in neighborhoods and cities in conjunction with schools opens new possibilities and resources for broadening and

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<sup>8</sup> [www.communitiesinschools.org](http://www.communitiesinschools.org)

<sup>9</sup> The idea of learning communities goes much further back to early Greek history where Athens, Alexandria and Damascus, involved a majority of their people in learning. They referred to their cities as “Cities of Learning.”

<sup>10</sup> For more information see Norman Longworth, *Learning Cities, Learning Regions, Learning Communities: Lifelong Learning and Local Government* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006).

improving learning in the United States. Such an effort also creates new opportunities for public work with a wide range of people. It requires an authentic and long-term community engagement process that taps the learning resources embedded in a place. It begins with a large vision and small, steady steps that show visible change.

This paper tells the story of two St. Paul neighborhoods where organizations and residents have co-created learning communities and describes how those neighborhood experiences inform a citywide effort to align agencies, connects schools with community resources, and reinforce neighborhood-owned civic initiatives throughout the city.

### **Neighborhoods Matter**

Research demonstrates that place matters in learning. The unique natural and cultural history, geography, and social composition of specific communities offer important resources for experiential learning and connectivity.<sup>11</sup> Trends in community life across the country point to increased fear and isolation among citizens, and a decline of many neighborhoods due to economic stress. Many families no longer work or go to school in the places where they live. Frequently, all adults in a household must work outside the home. As a result, children often lead highly structured lives, participating in many activities away from the neighborhoods where they live. This limits their opportunity to connect with neighbors, experience the richness of community life, and participate in non-formal and informal learning available there.

Neighborhood-centered learning counters this disconnection from place. It names the full spectrum of learning vital to children and youth. It enlists businesses and libraries, schools and community centers, even rivers and parks as vital places of learning for everyone. Learning communities connect to a city's wider resources and infrastructure, but reclaim a strong, local role in nurturing their children and youth.

A significant number of residents in St. Paul's East Side and West Side neighborhoods, together with many anchoring institutions, were keenly interested in this reclaiming. As coordinators, we wanted to use a citizen-centered approach to marshal resources from a variety of people and organizations to amplify opportunity and share

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<sup>11</sup> See Promise of Place: Enriching Lives through Place-Based Education for a compiled listing of research articles, [http://www.promiseofplace.org/Research\\_Evaluation/Search\\_Results?show\\_all=true](http://www.promiseofplace.org/Research_Evaluation/Search_Results?show_all=true).

responsibility. Further, we understood that the larger purpose, aimed at lifelong learning, was both a motivating vision and large enough umbrella to engage a range of people and organizations.

With grant support from the state government and private foundations, the two neighborhoods created and implemented neighborhood learning communities, broadly defined as *a coordinated network of people and organizations that work together to build relationships with children and youth in order to strengthen learning and support their holistic, healthy development.*

### **The West Side Neighborhood**

The West Side, a geographically discrete neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota, with a population of about 16,000 people, has a strongly developed sense of place in contrast with many less well-defined, contiguous urban neighborhoods. It is bounded on three sides by the Mississippi River and by a county line on the fourth. The neighborhood's topography—an extensive river frontage and system of caves formed in the limestone river bluffs—was a natural site for early industries such as breweries, quarries, and manufacturing plants. Today much of the riverfront property is considered prime land for development.

Over the years, many immigrant groups have settled in the neighborhood, producing a rich cultural diversity that has long been a source of identity and pride. In 2010, Latino, Hmong, and East Africans—mainly Somali people—represent the dominant immigrant communities residing here. “West Side Pride,” a mantra repeated frequently by residents young and old, expresses the strong affiliation many associate with the neighborhood. Indeed, people who have long since moved from the area often retain a West Side identity.

Although cultural diversity is a source of neighborhood pride, it also creates tensions not atypical of communities with the social and economic complexities of a fast changing urban environment which fosters divisions along lines of class and ethnicity. On the West Side, new immigrants, especially non-native English speakers, sometimes find themselves isolated from the activities of the larger community. Another, perhaps more subtle, obstacle is that the dominant culture often views new immigrant families in terms of their needs and deficits, ultimately creating a collective sense of inferiority and powerlessness. In an area of concentrated poverty like the West Side, with its many nonprofit social service organizations dependent on outside funding, this framework is particularly reinforced. The social service delivery model easily hides the contributions immigrants can offer the community and diminishes efforts to organize for power.

Yet the West Side neighborhood has in many ways been an ideal setting for cultivation of a learning community. The West Side has long nurtured a spirit of activism and community involvement. It has a history of organizing around issues related to education, fueled in part by immigrant parents' energy to help their children succeed in a new country. In recent years, we have seen that when adults and young people take on leadership roles in the community around significant public work, the nature of interaction among groups changes from competition to coordination at least, and collaboration at best. People are learning how to build networks and power relationships to shape the community. These efforts offer an alternative discourse about people and their contributions.

## **The East Side**

St. Paul's East Side history is also shaped by its unique river geography. For hundreds of years native people settled the area, finding sacred sites along the caves formed by the river. Indian burial mounds high on the river bluffs remain important cultural markers in the city and region.

In the 1800s, German, Irish, Swedish and Italian immigrants arrived in large numbers by boat and rail to settle on the East Side. They established churches, businesses, and cultural institutions, and the area flourished. But over time, poor land use decisions, pollution and environmental decline, and eventually urban sprawl led the East Side into decline.

Like the West Side, the East Side has seen significant demographic changes. According to 2000 Census data, the number of school aged children grew by more than 50% in both the Dayton's Bluff and Payne-Phalen neighborhoods (a total of 12,703 school-aged youth between the ages of 5-17). Half of the children were not native English speakers and did not speak English in their homes at the time of the Census. Not surprisingly, almost a quarter of families with children in these neighborhoods had incomes below the poverty level.

Today, new Americans—Hmong, Latino and African—have joined with long-time St. Paul residents to renew their neighborhoods. They are building on efforts begun in the 1970s to revitalize their neighborhoods through community-led partnerships and investment by private and public entities. This work provides context for the neighborhood learning initiative.

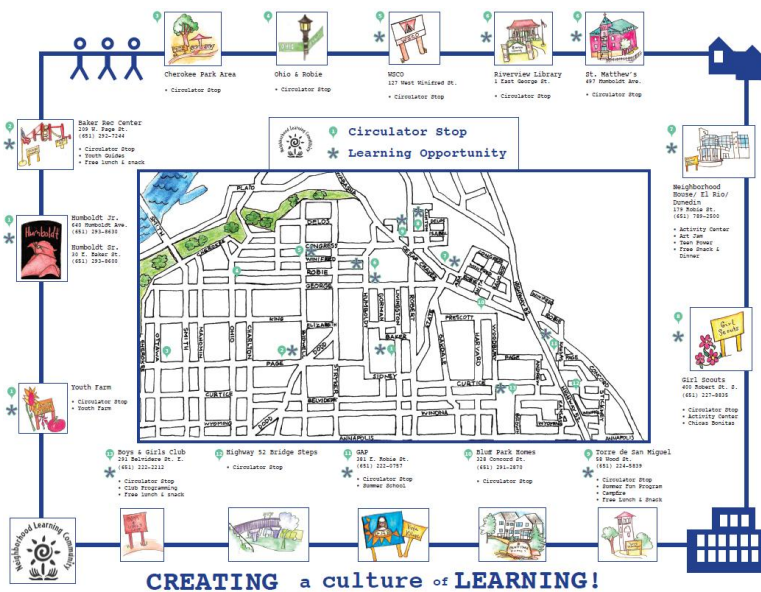
## **Neighborhood Learning Infrastructure – Key Elements**

It took time and experience to learn what structures foster and sustain a coordinated learning network. When the West Side launched its Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC) a decade ago, it had generous support from several foundations—enough to build and refine the scaffolding. As funding sources shifted, leaders modified and sometimes reinvented components of the infrastructure. The elements described below are those determined most essential. Both West and East side designs include some aspect of each structure named.

***Transportation.*** Helping people to visualize a whole learning environment was an initial challenge in both neighborhoods. Seeing possible “configurations of learning,” as Cremin put it, seemed a far reach in the early days because connecting the dots required a conceptual shift or different mental map. Few could see the many existing learning activities linked in a coordinated whole. We learned early that a visible neighborhood transportation system could become a powerful catalyst toward a collective image of a “neighborhood alive with learning.” A neighborhood bus—the circulator—became the vehicle through which people began to visualize an interconnected neighborhood network.

Prior to creation of the Neighborhood Learning Community, many organizations on the West Side owned and operated vans for transportation. However, as these nonprofits saw transportation costs increase substantially, they grew more willing to consider pooling funds to support a shared transportation system. The neighborhood circulator, as it has come to be known, was an early successful collaborative effort for the West Side that provided needed traction for other innovations. The idea for the circulator did not originate with organization staff but with residents who had long thought about a neighborhood trolley. The community connector (organizer), aware that organizations were preparing to submit separate proposals for summer transportation, took the idea forward and convinced them to work together—a big step toward more authentic collaboration.

Once people in local organizations recognized they might expand participation in programs *and* save money, they developed a proposal and received a joint grant to support a neighborhood bus. Partners labored over a negotiated route and schedule to best accommodate after programming at each organization site and at local parks and recreation fields and to determine stops at streets most accessible to large numbers of children. This meant working with the bus company and crisscrossing the neighborhood multiple times to determine the exact stops and the timing. “We learned many things that year, like how to design a route so the bus didn’t have to make awkward turns,” remembers Kari Denissen, the learning community organizer at the time.



A pocket map shows the West Side Circulator route. The flip side lists the times and locations of afterschool programs.

A foundation grant covering the first circulator was awarded to one organization, which became the fiscal agent for the group. Most of the work, however, was done by a task group whose members represented the core group of organizations involved. In the early days, not all West Side youth serving organizations got on board and did not participate on the planning committee. Even so, routes included stops at these sites. It took a few years and increased visibility before more organizations joined the working group. Keeping the door open for latecomers has been an important lesson. Reflecting on her experience, Catherine Penkert, the city staff person who assists the East Side Learning Collaborative told us:

The circulator has been an important concrete step to the people who really believe in the large neighborhood vision and understand collaboration. There are also people who can't get out of the box. We hear comments like, "If it doesn't stop at our front door, it doesn't work for us," or "It doesn't line up with our schedule so we can't use it." We are starting to see some shifts in this reluctant group, however. The Boys & Girls Club could not see its value initially. Now they've joined the transportation work group. Sometimes it takes one staff person who really wants to make it work and takes initiative to get involved to bring the organization along. You have to hang in there. It's a process.<sup>12</sup>

To get the circulator running required many steps and decision points: contracting with a school bus company, work with the driver, agreement on policies for riders, design of signs for the stops, outreach, and creating a data collection system to track the number of rides given. With each year, processes were streamlined and organization roles became clearer. In June 2003, the West Side Circulator made its first run. People in the neighborhood saw immediate impact. Organizations tracking changes related to staff time, program participation, and budgets were able to see convincing evidence of early benefits. Anecdotally, we heard children talk about going to new places in the neighborhood with a newfound sense of freedom. Parents, though somewhat wary at first, appreciated support for children's transportation by the end of the summer. In the following year the circulator was expanded to run after school four days each week and throughout the summer. By the end of 2009, the West Side circulator had provided 107,000 rides.

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine Penkert, 1.21.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

Not surprisingly, the circulator idea sparked interest. In 2006, the City of St. Paul's Second Shift Commission, recognizing the benefits on the West Side, convened East Side neighborhood residents and community organization staff to determine neighborhood interest and capacity to implement a circulator in a second neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> About 20 East Siders—organization staff and residents—joined an initial planning group that included residents, some of whom were also members of the two district planning councils. This loosely formed group contributed to the start-up tasks. They mapped existing learning opportunities and studied the details of the West Side experience.

Apprehensions surfaced as early planning proceeded. Many expressed worry about safety, a long time concern among neighborhood residents. Others saw opportunity for a different narrative that might emerge from this work. “The community will play a role in crafting solutions to expected problems, but we should not start this project with negative beliefs about youth,” warned one district council member concerned about getting off on the wrong foot.<sup>14</sup> The planning group decided that pre-registration and issuance of bus cards would help minimize possible trouble on the bus. They hired youth workers through the city's Youth Job Corps to ride the routes regularly to assist small children on and off the bus and help should anyone become lost. The youth workers also collected data, essential to evaluation and future planning.

The initial planning group decided issues such as which age groups would benefit most, how to get the word out to families with children likely to use the circulator, how to prevent vandalism, and how to oversee this new neighborhood infrastructure. They invited people to participate in a community meeting to build support and participation. The public meeting brought visibility to the effort. Meanwhile several members of the city's Second Shift Commission convened a group of funders, six of whom agreed to support three circulators running separate routes in the first summer.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the third summer, the East Side circulators had provided 9,280 rides.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> St. Paul's Mayor, Chris Coleman, launched the Second Shift Initiative in 2005 to ensure involvement of the city in expanding children's learning beyond the school day.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of District 5 Planning Council meeting, 12.12.06.

<sup>15</sup> Analysis of ridership in the first summer informed the decision to run two circulators there after.

<sup>16</sup> The East Side circulator routes intersect with the West Side circulator to accommodate youth who live in one community and participate in learning activities in the other. After the first summer the committee determined two rather than circulators could serve the neighborhoods.

Neighborhood transportation has proved essential to children and youth participation in afterschool and school release day learning activities.

***Coordinating council.*** A core working group or leadership team builds relationships, facilitates communication, helps coordinate and connect learning, and importantly, carries the vision in both the West Side and East Side. Working group members come from a network of core organizations and include neighborhood residents. The leadership team functions best as an independent entity rather than as a subgroup of any one organization or arm of city government that might restrain creativity or flexibility—two vital characteristics of the coordinating group.

On the East Side, a staff member from the city who was the former West Side community connector, helped to launch the neighborhood initiative. She understood well the familiar top-down power structure typically experienced between city government and neighborhoods. Because people were used to city officials making decisions and leading, it took some time for self-directed working groups to emerge.

When the East Side Learning Collaborative (coordinating council) formed, authority began to shift from city staff to neighborhood leaders. Their co-created community vision and theory of change proved useful tools to conceptualize learning in the neighborhood and organize the work in four areas.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the coordinating council helped people claim ownership and define their work. Catherine Penkert, who also works for the city, recalls:

The collaborative named four areas of work: “learn everywhere,” “connect the circle,” “expand the capacity to work,” and “broadcast it.” This means new programs, work on the circulator, professional development for youth workers, and getting the word out. These main tasks formed the working groups. I facilitate the circulator group and am a member of the program group. Groups meet regularly and always have something to report back to the coordinating council. It’s not perfect, but it seems to work. There is a sense of moving forward. People aren’t paid for this extra work. If we set realistic expectations it works.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The East Side neighborhood vision: People of all ages are positive, responsible, contributing partners who know they belong; guide and support all our children; and work together to create and sustain quality opportunities for young people to learn, grow, and lead.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Penkert, 1.21.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

In the early years of the West Side Neighborhood Learning Community, the coordinating council convened a twice-monthly meeting, one focused on nuts and bolts, the other on learning and leadership development. These were anchored in semi-annual reflective planning retreats, which offered space for team building, planning and priority setting. This reflection space reinforced people's practice of critical inquiry and allowed for experimentation with practices like story circles and other approaches that drew out people's stories and engaged active listening to each other. David Scheie, the project evaluator, remembers:

At the retreats I attended there was good space for the sharper challenge to existing frameworks. I was impressed when I began, with the commitment and skill of the project leaders at Jane Addams School for Democracy—how they welcomed and handled this. I would say this was unusual--how comfortable people were with challenge and ambiguity. I found it refreshing and exciting. They had the capacity not to get nervous as co-creativity took off. There was tension about how to handle all the ideas, when to let go. When you cultivate capacity for generation you need structures to support it. As funding streams shifted, these extended retreats ended, but the ongoing practices of group reflection and widespread participatory evaluation remain. The East Side Learning Collaborative functions in a similar way.<sup>19</sup>

*Community connector.* Designated as the learning community's organizer, the connector builds relationships among people and organizations to identify and create points of interconnectivity. We have learned that these "locations" form the nexus of innovative activity. The community connector also develops individual and neighborhood capacity to support non-formal learning and articulates and spreads the shared vision. Learning opportunities exist in all neighborhoods, and most people generate ideas, if asked, but this requires a lot of face-to-face conversation. Because relationships form the heart of the neighborhood-learning model, all members of the coordinating council carry responsibility, but the community connector oversees and helps grow the relational network.

In the West Side Neighborhood Learning Community's formative phase, the community connector listened especially for people's individual and collective learning aspirations. When a group of teens expressed their worry about finding meaningful summer work, the connector along with the coordinating council created the Youth

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<sup>19</sup> David Scheie, 2.26.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

Apprenticeship Project to provide paid summer internships in the neighborhood. The project established a network of adults in local businesses, community organizations, and government offices who continue to provide mentorship. The program, now in its fifth year, collaborates with the City of St. Paul's Youth Job Corps, to support paid summer internships. This project has been key to building the neighborhood's capacity to support youth learning.

As the start up funding for the Neighborhood Learning Community came to an end and financial support for the connector position disappeared, members of the leadership team assumed the connecting roles. In retrospect, we see the value of the position even more clearly. Assigning an AmeriCorps or Vista worker to this position yields limited results, because the effectiveness of the connector depends upon well-grounded neighborhood relationships. One to two-year assignments limit one's ability to sustain and deepen the relationships necessary to a functioning network. It is possible that existing positions might be redefined or expanded to fill a community connector role (e.g. afterschool coordinators or school liaison positions could be reconfigured).

*Evaluation and data systems.* We began this work with a strong conviction that participatory evaluation undergirds public work—that citizens can analyze information and use it to inform decisions. With guidance from The Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, we created an evaluation plan, designed straightforward data collection tools – both quantitative and qualitative—and contracted with an online databank to store and provide first level analysis. We collect basic quantitative information such as: demographic data; who participates in what and how often; parent and teacher perceptions of youth and children's learning; and youth perceptions of programs they attend. The coordinating council conducts annual interviews of parents, community teachers, program leaders, and children and older youth to better understand learning experiences and supporting infrastructure. In addition, programs like the Youth Apprenticeship Project and a children's summer camp called, All-Around-the-Neighborhood, use photographic documentation to make children's learning visible to children, the teachers and the community. To support neighborhood capacity, Touchstone provides ongoing training and assists in the annual community gatherings where

neighborhood residents and organization staff discuss findings and contribute to the interpretation.

Building a common neighborhood data collection system that all partnering organizations contribute to is challenging. It requires widespread agreement to collect information using a common form and to report in a timely manner at regular intervals. Most organizations collect participation and demographic data for their own purposes. But organizations operate on different timelines, and some hesitate to share information with outside groups. However, to understand the growth and impact of a neighborhood based approach, data collection from all programs supported by the NLC is critical. It has taken time and public accountability to grow organization cooperation.

Data collection and analysis, though a major focus, is not the only data-related function needed. For instance, St. Paul Community Education provides invaluable assistance to the West Side neighborhood by managing registrations and mailings for summer programs. Building and implementing a user-friendly community-based evaluation system from the ground up requires major effort. However, it is an essential piece of a community learning infrastructure.

### **Co-creating a Neighborhood Learning Community**

Both neighborhoods share five core elements in their approach to child and youth learning, which grew out of the work and developed over time.

*Learning-focused.* These initiatives aim to nurture a local culture that promotes and values learning for everyone. Life-long learning is encouraged and modeled by parents, neighbors, youth workers and other adults. Adults have opportunities for leadership development and mentoring. Learning for children and young teens and older youth includes life skills such as cooking and fitness, leadership development, and apprenticeships as well as reinforcement for academic subjects through science, technology and communications projects.

*Collaborative politics.* Public work aims toward shared leadership where citizens including young people, business owners, organization staff, teachers; and others who work in the neighborhood drive the process. Engagement ultimately contributes to strong

commitment and ownership, public accountability, and strengthened civic identities. As public work results in something useful to citizens it also helps to build public cultures.

*Place based.* A focus on place helps youth and children become more familiar with the people, opportunities, and landmarks in their neighborhood. Stories and exploration of the community's history, geography, and accomplishments intentionally woven into the design of learning experiences help children and adults build and renew a sense of connection to the place where they live and/or work.

*Flexible and structured.* A neighborhood learning community requires an infrastructure to coordinate people, programs, and transportation. In this model, no single entity holds the power; rather, the collaborating group oversees elements of the infrastructure. Inter-organizational relationships and networks of people, with effective communication among them, are integral to a successful learning community structure. Structures provide stability and coherence, but they must be flexible enough to allow for innovation and new opportunities. Built-in features of dialogue and reflection yield ideas for creative experimentation.

*Connected to larger systems.* Neighborhoods alone cannot easily sustain a learning community. Citywide agencies and systems contribute important resources as well as supportive system-wide policies that respond to local issues. The challenge: large systems, rigidly structured, tend toward hierarchical decision-making and top-down communication with neighborhoods. Although neighborhood leaders make many decisions at the local level, inevitably they experience frustration when citywide systems centered beyond the neighborhood—schools, libraries, parks, higher education—make decisions that directly affect neighborhoods. Collaborative work between the city and its neighborhoods involves a complex dynamic, explains Kari Denissen who has worked on the learning initiative from both sides.

It's not that city agencies don't get input from neighborhoods. They do it through city meetings. It's more a matter of understanding how to partner authentically with communities to solve the larger public problems they face together. City officials "listen to input" but are perceived by neighborhoods to ignore it because "experts" go ahead with plans they had already made. On the other side, neighborhoods often don't know how to partner with local government to solve public problems. Citizens talk to government as consumers—"don't close my rec center." But they don't often take the next step offer solutions. It's a two-way issue.

Navigating political dynamics between government, public schools and neighborhoods is an area of critical importance requiring relationship building and skill development in naming and framing problems and their solutions.

*Ongoing professional development.* People who work with youth are notoriously underpaid, work odd hours, and earn few benefits. They work with a population that commands little respect. Society generally perceives their work as having low value. As a result, morale can be low, turnover high, and skill levels limited. The East Side and West Side neighborhoods have invested in the professional development of youth workers to counter these pressures.

Faculty from the University of Minnesota Youth Studies department use a learning community model to engage cohorts of youth workers. Sharing everyday examples from their practice, youth workers reflect on how to develop programming based on youth interests as well as needs; how to work collaboratively with other youth serving organizations, businesses, civic groups; and how to work more effectively within their own agencies with colleagues and supervisors.

Youth work practice in these neighborhoods shows change as a result of the professional development cohorts. Youth workers' language and perspectives reflect a stronger professional identity. They report successes in altering their programs' approach in order to meet kids where they are. Interviews and focus groups with youth workers found that youth workers improved knowledge and effectiveness as a result of their participation in the peer learning seminars.

These changes have begun to extend into city infrastructure as well. A new job title, Community Youth Worker, and three new positions are being created within the Parks and Recreation Department, signaling a new recognition of the important role professional youth workers can play in positive youth development.

On the West Side, professional development opportunities also extend to parents and older youth who help to lead the nine-week summer camp for children in grades K-5 called All-Around-the-Neighborhood (AATN). The workshop series models a constructivist approach to curriculum development—one in which children and teachers become co-investigators. They learn a process of photographic documentation to make

visible children's thinking and discoveries. These images facilitate reflection by the children and help to engage parents.<sup>20</sup>

In our interviews, some adults told us they that they had learned more about the places and history of the neighborhood. They valued the opportunity to create new relationships across generations, and they learned how to work through conflicts arising from different perspectives about children's learning and development. Adults also told us they learned about cultural traditions from the children. Staff employed by local organizations, who served as group leaders for AATN, told us that they experienced a different way of working with children and youth. Perhaps the most dramatic example of adult learning came from a community teacher who, after discovering how much she enjoyed the challenges and rewards in teaching children, plans to pursue a master's degree in education at the University of Minnesota. When learning rather than delivering services is the focus, adults as well as children benefit and learning becomes more visible in the community.

*Learning conferences.* Neighborhoods need a public space and occasion to bring people together for sharing experiences, planning critical reflection, and celebration. Annual neighborhood learning conferences gather participants from East and West Side neighborhoods, including youth to review and make meaning of data collected, discuss experiences of the past year and hone strategies for the coming year. Public officials, program officers, and policy makers also frequently attend. Learning conferences bring visibility to a variety of projects, some led by youth, thus giving greater visibility to the interconnected network. They have proved a successful venue to engage a broader group in networking, professional development, and to connect with the civic work underway. This participatory evaluation is a central feature in both neighborhoods.

### **Building Relationships Across Structures**

*Forging links with neighborhood schools.* The challenges in building pathways between schools and the neighborhood are well documented. Among them: culture and policy differences between schools and community organizations which create barriers to

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<sup>20</sup> The documentation process and learning approach are inspired by principles adapted from Reggio Emilia philosophy of education. We draw on the expertise of Reggio inspired educators to assist with the workshops.

moving easily between schools and the neighborhood; time schedules conflict; growing pressure on schools to show student improvement keeps teachers oriented to work inside the classrooms, leaving little time or energy to build connections with youth workers in afterschool programs. One West Side leader reflects on his efforts to connect the schools and neighborhood,

I have a deeper understanding of the school culture now. Teachers don't believe they can be co-creators. They see their job as carrying things out, doing what they are told. This seems true even with the principal, who feels his hands are tied. That said, we've figured out how to have creative activities held in the school building, taught by community teachers.<sup>21</sup>

Relationship building with the principal and teachers at Guadalupe Alternative Program took several years. In the first two years, teachers and the principal mostly ignored the technology program even though it occurred on site. But as the youth began creating interesting projects and formed close ties with the community teacher, visibility increased. The lesson: keep at it. Keep the door open.

In another example, Humboldt High School—the public school on the West Side—plans to begin an extended day in the 2010-2011 academic year. “Part of their willingness to do this comes from their realization that there are high quality afterschool learning programs available to students in the school building,” says Erik Skold, coordinator of Learning in Cities. Urban Boat Builders is one such program.

The boat builders know their craft and how to work with kids. They don't have to worry about attendance or snacks or equipment or space – it's all there for them. This infrastructure is one reason it works for community people. We need to develop this kind of infrastructure so that more community teachers can interact with kids.<sup>22</sup>

Locating community-led afterschool programs inside schools is an important step, but it represents only half the equation. In a well-integrated learning community, children and youth engage in learning throughout the entire community. School personnel and community youth workers need to collaborate in order to find the curricular links that

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<sup>21</sup> 1.26.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

<sup>22</sup> Erik Skold, 3.22.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

support academic learning. In our experience, these essential relationships are fragile and easily fall apart with personnel change. Without an intentional, place-based network to formalize and sustain such relationships the challenge for scalability within a neighborhood and across the city appears insurmountable.

*Engaging parents and residents in community learning.* In our experience, parents and grandparents of elementary aged children who live in the neighborhood are more likely to participate in the learning community than are parents of older youth. We've also seen that when clear roles are defined, parents are more likely to participate. The AATN summer draws the most participation. Parents and other residents serve as community teachers, they volunteer as teacher assistants, and they offer talents in other ways such as, contributing materials, sharing contacts with resource people, and assisting with planning activities.

On the West Side a network of adult mentors working in neighborhood nonprofit organizations and local businesses, provide apprenticeships for teens through the Youth Apprenticeship Project. This project includes some minimal development activities for mentors, but most of the adult learning comes through interaction with the teens. Neil Cunningham, a long time mentor at the Biological Control Facility, guided Chang Xiong, who apprenticed in his facility. Cunningham told us, "Chang has a worldview that is unique. We've talked about life in the refugee camp in Thailand. There he raised fish and frogs and had a garden too. Chang told me about digging a well for water. I'm learning a whole new perspective on water. It's teaching me a deeper respect for what we are doing in Saint Paul. We have a water supply, but we can have a much better respect for it. His worldview deepens my experience."<sup>23</sup>

While these examples represent a foothold, to realize the goal of a "neighborhood alive with learning" will require far more involvement of adults. A new approach, linked to schools and supportive of parents' learning, is planned for the 2010-11 school year. *Learning Dreams*, the model, developed by Jerry Stein at the University of Minnesota, focuses on family learning. "The traditional way to generate parent involvement is to seek parent support for their child's learning," says Stein. But we have found that it is more effective to appeal to the parents as deeply curious people with their own needs to

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<sup>23</sup> Neil Cunningham, 8.23.08, Nan Kari interviewer.

dream, grow and learn. In *Learning Dreams*, parents of students who are struggling in school identify and pursue their own learning dreams.”<sup>24</sup> Neighborhood educators mentor adults and work with community organizations to connect adult learners with resources. The St. Paul school superintendent supports the plan to integrate this model with a West Side elementary school, which will be linked with the NLC infrastructure already in place.

### **Building a City-wide System to support Neighborhood Learning: Early Steps**

As citizens and nonprofit organizations work to build neighborhood networks, we find that significant decision-making authority resides outside the neighborhood, often in places and systems inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Over the last 20 years, local government in an effort to centralize functions and create seemingly more efficient and accountable systems, tended to streamline processes and cement bureaucratic hierarchies that result in decreased responsiveness to local needs. As a consequence, citywide institutions like public schools, parks and recreation, and libraries, once firmly rooted in local communities are now under the auspices of the central office, where decisions are made, often quite removed from the realities of individual neighborhoods. An efficient one size fits all does not necessarily address the interests of citizens engaged in building learning networks. This shift in authority creates a dynamic that leads some citizens to cede their authority and wait for direction from the top.

As the neighborhood model has begun to take root, it became clear that a larger city scaffolding is needed to accomplish the change envisioned—one based on reciprocal relationships, common agreements and practices, and a shared knowledge base. We also recognize the need for a different political dynamic between the city and neighborhoods, one in which citizens, community nonprofits, government agencies and schools work together to improve education. The lessons learned at the neighborhood level inform work with the city.

In a first step as the neighborhood circulators generated wider interest, a citywide circulator task force convened to provide guidance for their expansion tied to support of children’s learning. This group drew on early lessons of the two neighborhoods but went

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<sup>24</sup> Jerry Stein, 2.17.10, Nan Kari, Nan Skelton interviewers.

beyond to study urban transportation issues and models across the country. They supported a cost benefit analysis and advised on core issues such as sustainability, fund raising, and legislative policies. The intent was to bring together decision makers well positioned in diverse organizations, who understood how to make needed changes in local and statewide policies. Their collective political clout garnered authority, raised visibility and contributed to effective decision-making. Members included neighborhood leaders, city planners, legislators, statewide out of school time organizations, members of the teachers' union, several private foundations, faith community representatives, school district staff, members of the city council, Metro Transit staff, and people from the Mayor's Office and Center for Democracy and Citizenship.

The task force devised an agenda that revolved around the transportation tensions noted in the community. Some people wanted circulators to include rides for senior citizens. The liveliest conversations centered on public schools allowing children to use neighborhood circulators as part of their transportation package. Some saw it as a reasonable way to reduce school transportation costs, a major drain on school budgets. School district representatives, however, raised strong objection based on legal constraints. Task force members eventually recognized the reality of the district's policy restrictions but argued that a policy change could be made if the state legislators, non-profits and schools worked to achieve a system that maintains children's safety while encouraging participation in community learning opportunities. In the end, the task force recommended development of a legislative proposal to waive regulations in order to pilot afterschool transportation. In addition they recommended a division of responsibility between the citywide and neighborhood levels. The city would have oversight of contracts and safety policies, of creating a data system and coordinating with Metro Transit. At the local level, neighborhoods would establish a coordinating committee to develop and implement a plan and manage the day-to-day operations. (See Appendix A: Citywide Circulator Recommendations for division of roles.)

This effort showed us that with relatively little effort a mixed group of committed professionals and neighborhood people were willing to work together on an issue that has potential to impact children's learning and begin to change a system. In the process,

members learned from each other and developed new relationships across professional and agency lines.

After eight months of work, the task force sent recommendations to the mayor's office and school district. Some recommendations have moved forward but not the entire package. However the Circulator Task Force tilled the soil and planted seeds to design a citywide learning system, shaped by neighborhoods and connected to schools.

Building on this work, in 2009, the City of Saint Paul and Center for Democracy and Citizenship initiated a project called, *Learning in Cities* that focuses on creating a culture of learning that spans city neighborhoods. The overall aim is to shift the educational system from a school-centered approach to one that utilizes the agency and responsibility of whole communities, including children, families and many institutions. Our experience working with St. Paul neighborhoods and the education system convinced us that aligning in-school standards and out-of-school learning expectations is key to improvement of children's learning.<sup>25</sup> The growing sense of crisis opens the door for community involvement. As Suzanne Kelly, chief of staff in the St. Paul Public Schools said, "We are facing the fierce urgency of now!"<sup>26</sup>

Our initial organizing efforts have focused on building relationships and power across city systems and neighborhood networks to develop the architecture necessary to create a comprehensive out-of-school system aligned with school-based learning. The mix of people working across silos in new configurations is significant. The first year's work focused in the following four areas.

*Engage citizens to redefine youth success for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* We began by asking, what is the current definition of youth success? Does it need to be altered? With the goal to define youth success in a way that reflects people's values, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship convened 40 listening sessions across the city with 345 people participating including youth, communities of color, parents, teachers, business leaders, and other citizens. Five themes emerged: (1) traits/characteristics, (2) skills, (3) content knowledge young people need to be successful, (4) long-term outcomes of

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<sup>25</sup> This work has roots in the National Task Force Report: *A New Day for Learning*, published by the Mott Foundation, [www.newdayforlearning.org/about.html](http://www.newdayforlearning.org/about.html).

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Kelly, remarks given at Learning Campus Design Retreat, 2.4.10.

successful youth, and (5) systems and community supports necessary for youth success. We developed a *framework* for youth success reflecting these areas to present to the Second Shift Commission. The framework identifies three roles: youth as learner, navigator, and contributor. It will be used as an organizing tool in ongoing discussions related to development of learning campuses across the city. The goal is to secure endorsement of the framework and a commitment to take action by St. Paul Public Schools, the City of Saint Paul, St. Paul Federation of Teachers, community-based organizations, and the St. Paul business community. (See Appendix B Youth Success Framework.)

*Design and pilot “learning campuses” across the city.* The city sees its diverse neighborhoods, each with unique histories and resources, among its greatest assets. But connecting community learning with schools remains challenging. To maximize these assets for learning, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship and Second Shift Initiative hosted a design retreat with school district administrators, representatives of the local teacher union, members of the mayor’s education policy team, city council members, and community organization staff. In all, it was a remarkable mix of people working together in new ways.

We organized a design team to generate preliminary plans to coordinate out-of-school programs and link them with formal learning in school, similar to neighborhood learning communities, but with formalized pathways between schools and neighborhood opportunities. We call them *learning campuses*. Participants crafted guiding principles, identified key elements, and drew preliminary zones for six campuses. Priority will be given to organizing campuses in areas with high concentrations of poverty and large populations of school-age youth. We catalyzed significant political energy through the design retreat, essential to the long-term organizing effort.

*Construct a comprehensive data management system.* We know that children and youth learn in many places inside and outside of school. People collect evidence in a variety of forms and through many different programs and school settings, yet there is currently no way to create a holistic picture of learning and achievement. Once developed this system will combine and coordinate data on children and youth learning from their participation in out-of-school programs and eventually link with information collected by

schools. In its first phase the system will help city staff to map trends in out-of-school programming and provide data for evaluating its impact on academic achievement.

*Promote collaboration between teachers and youth workers.* Building on a neighborhood project developed by the West Side to engage teachers and youth workers in shared learning, the St. Paul Teachers Federation, CDC and the Second Shift Initiative are creating plans to link professional development to learning campuses. As a first step youth workers and licensed teachers participated in the St. Paul Federation of Teachers annual conference. Teachers and youth workers led workshops, underscoring that both groups can share useful knowledge. The event fostered new relationships and contributed to further development of the learning campus planning.

## **The Politics of Public Work**

### ***Political challenges***

It takes more than a well-developed infrastructure to shift the way that citizens view their roles and responsibilities in support of children's learning. In our individually oriented, consumerist society, parents opt for the best educational "product" for their children and schools aim to deliver quality goods. The consumerism and service delivery thus go together like hand and glove and are difficult to interrupt. Further, school systems are shaped by hierarchical and rigid structures, perceived to be out of reach, even though public schools and boards are ultimately accountable to the citizenry. People without school-aged children may vote for tax levies for local school improvement or volunteer as mentors for children. While these may be helpful individual responses, these acts do not build the citizen power base needed to change systems, let alone change our narrowed view of learning as the sole realm of schools.

In our work in and across neighborhoods and with the city, we've encountered other predictable obstacles. For example, people commonly work in silos that shape well-developed identities and cultures that define relationships and ways of working. Systems and structures reinforce these cultures and sometimes promote separation rather than interconnection. Learning to cross cultural borders of many kinds has been an important area of learning. We found for instance, cultural differences among organization staff and community residents volunteering to work with them. Sense of timing, ways of tackling

tasks, and accountability differ. Working across organizations challenge people to acknowledge cultural differences. Obvious distinctions surface when people work in groups with diverse ethnicities. But when people create authentic working relationships attentive to similarities as well as differences, it is possible to learn to cross borders of many kinds. The large vision provides an important point of interconnectivity.

Change does not happen without the exercise of power. When people experience powerlessness, they accomplish little. Even those who carry authority by virtue of their professional titles or positions sometimes profess an inability to make change, often locating themselves outside the work, critiquing rather than contributing. Power understood as reciprocal rather than one-way and seen as dynamic—able to be built—offers an alternative view to the dominant understanding of power as hierarchical and positional.

Collaborative strategies build power, but in reality, people's intention for collaboration can be more rhetorical than authentic. Collaboration requires relationship building, willingness to share authority and accountability, and an openness to change. It contrasts with cooperation in that it requires deeper give and take in order to create something new. Groups generally include people with differing interests and skills in collaboration, but with a few core, skilled people leading the process, collaboration can succeed. Regular reflective practice and shared accountability is key.

What kind of politics will it take to address these all too familiar obstacles to create a new reality, one in which people of all ages actively embrace learning for everyone? Our experience working in local neighborhoods and with the city, using a public work frame shows results. Ten years after the launch of the West Side Neighborhood Learning Community, the city, the school district, along with other important players have taken positive steps to construct a new learning system. The political lessons learned at the local level instruct strategies at the systems level.

Key to building a large learning system are the organizers or connectors who move fluidly across neighborhood and city groups—people who build relationships and develop fluency in neighborhood and institutional politics. Similar to the neighborhood community connector, organizers recognize when groups lack the capacity to do the co-creative work, then mobilize resources to address capacity issues. Culture change work

requires sustained energy, encouragement and ability to redefine jobs with a public work approach. Like the neighborhood examples, a shared vision that public work will have significant impact on children's lives motivates engagement from many sectors.

### ***Public work***

A public work frame deepens capacity for collaboration, engages a diverse mix of people across silo cultures, and builds reciprocal power. Any one of these factors—lack of power, the inability to work across cultures or systems or ability to leverage resources through collaborative work—presents significant obstacles to forward movement.

When work acquires public meanings, it holds potential to generate new authority and power for ordinary people in several ways. Work with visible impact done “in public,” enhances the claims of citizens for full and equal participation in public life. Secondly, the products of public work—in this instance, a coordinated learning network—bring visibility and authority. People claim ownership in what they help to build, and they generate new connections in larger circles. This grows a sense of individual and collective agency and it expands the understanding of citizen as voter or caring volunteer to co-producer of a shared public life. Finally, public work involving diverse people and groups who learn how to negotiate and work together for larger ends, educates citizens. In the process public work can illuminate local cultures that in turn help to sustain such work.

The politics of public work define a way of working together that helps to shift orientation from “what's good for me or my family or my organization” to “what helps the neighborhood's children.” In other words, when interests are embedded in a co-created, large public vision they deepen and expand. Catherine Penkert says that a shared visioning process helps root people's interest in public work. It builds ownership and an appetite for continued engagement in the work, and deepens the commitment to children and youth.

I think individual personalities at sites made the difference. People most willing to engage are those who like working with others and see that a large vision makes the difference. At first their interest seemed to be more in how it

could expand what “we can offer to the kids we know.” This continues to motivate a lot of the partners, and they see the benefits in working together.

One group called New Ventures wanted to be an incubator for new community projects. But they got overwhelmed thinking they would have to create and implement the programs. But the group helped them figure it out. In the end, they decided to create a “haves” and “needs” list – like a Craig’s list among the partners. So when the Design Center had a grant to do community dinners in conjunction with a research project about food access on the East Side, they needed places to hold the dinners. Another group had space and people. We are beginning to see a deeper collaboration when people share resources. It isn’t like a stopgap approach but more a sustained, co-created effort. It has been fascinating to watch. I had no idea how this was going to happen.<sup>27</sup>

Penkert further explains that different components of the vision create multiple entry points for involvement and help people see where they can make concrete contributions. But she adds, “I’m learning that it is not the smooth process that is often described in writing.”

Power and accountability alter hierarchical relationships in a public work frame. In the community learning work, no one individual or organization holds all the authority. The coordinating committee makes decisions. Partners negotiate accountability according to agreed upon roles that may change with each project. Roles and work responsibilities require clarity, but they are not necessarily distributed equally. Misunderstandings, unmet expectations, the sense that work is divided unequally, all potentially create potential stress points. Erik Skold reflects:

There is always tension when engaging in public work. Where do decisions get made? Who has the final say? On the West Side it’s less about getting everyone together to decide something and more about who is going to do the work...who has the energy to keep the work moving. If someone wants something but is not willing to work for it, it usually doesn’t happen. This way of working has been problematic in the NLC at times, but it is clear to most people now that those who show up and do the work make the decisions. If others say they don’t like something, we listen and if it’s a good reason, decisions may change. But if partners want something new, they need to share in the work.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine Penkert, 1.21.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

<sup>28</sup> Erik Skold, 3.22.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

Efforts to sustain momentum on large public work projects also shed light on more complicated decision-making processes working between city government, agencies, schools and neighborhoods. Decision-making is slowed at the institutional level for a host of reasons: job changes, budget constraints, new political realities, or crisis management at the city or school district. All of these pressures distract people from forward movement on the common strategy, which in turn causes the community groups to lose trust and energy. The result: everyone loses focus. When neighborhood groups push to hold forums for more community input, city and school district leaders sometimes complain of too much process. Their inclination is to circumvent extended discussion to move toward action. Thus they become the deciders by default. Tensions on both sides result from differences in expectations and ways of working and lack of understanding of each other's cultures, though all may agree on the goal. The consumer dynamic described above also comes into play. People expect to get something from government and civil servants and elected officials feel compelled to deliver services, thus amplifying the consumer framework.

It takes time, experience, and for some, new skills to begin to change these dynamics. Well-crafted meetings, reflection and public evaluation, as well as visibility for the work are essential. When agency heads participate in well-run community-led meetings where diverse people share experiences and ideas, new insights and energy can be generated. "Don't be stopped by these challenges, what's important, is to keep going. Assume positive intent and help others to do the same. People will learn to work together with experience," says Catherine Penkert.

Similarly at the neighborhood level, continued attention to leadership development and mentoring new people deepens the capacity for public work. Derek Johnson, director of West Side Initiatives for the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, observes:

When new people haven't worked in the "NLC way," they tend to rely on a professionalized or technocratic way of doing things. The first question people ask is, "where's the gap in services?" But this approach sometimes negates the nuances that result in creativity... There's a strong tendency to find the deficits

and deliver programs. It takes time to learn how to work from another model.<sup>29</sup>

The following chart compares characteristics of public work with a service delivery framework used by many schools and community organizations.

**LEARNING: TWO FRAMEWORKS**

| <b>POLITICS</b>  | <b>INTERESTS</b>  | <b>RELATIONSHIPS</b>   | <b>ACCOUNTABILITY</b>   | <b>POWER</b>  | <b>OUTCOMES</b>  |
|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| <b>Public work</b><br>(neighborhood learning communities)            | <u>Partners' interests:</u><br>embedded in a co-created vision that sees the entire neighborhood as a site of learning  | Reciprocal among neighborhood residents, parents, and professionals  | Accountability negotiated and shared among partners   | Many sources of power recognized.<br><br>Power grows through collaboration  | Co-created learning network<br><br>New skills developed<br><br>Agency and civic identities developed<br><br>Civic cultures created within institutions |
| <b>Service delivery</b><br>(schools & community based organizations) | <u>School personnel:</u><br>Meet the academic needs of students to pass the tests<br><br><u>Community orgs:</u><br>Provide programs to meet needs of participants | Top-down<br><br>Sometimes collaborative, develop around specific projects rather than a whole neighborhood | Accountable to policy makers based on imposed metrics<br><br>Accountable to funders. Community accountability less formalized; few venues for participation | Power centralized in hierarchical arrangements, flows one way<br><br>Minimal power sharing with clients/consumers | Information packaged and delivered<br><br>Students pass tests<br><br>After school programs delivered to clients  |

<sup>29</sup> Derek Johnson, 1.26.10, Nan Kari interviewer.

## Conclusion

Lawrence Cremin described the “fundamental problem” in U.S. education as “the tendency to focus so exclusively on the potentialities of the school as a lever of social improvement and reform as to ignore the possibilities of other educative institutions.” He describes an ecology of learning or “configurations of education” where “each ... institution within a configuration interacts with the others and with the larger society that sustains it and that is in turn affected by it... The education of each child emerges from the interplay, or lack of interplay, of the various elements within the configuration.”<sup>30</sup> This dynamic he believed could fuel individual growth and development and strengthen society. Yet the dominant discourse in education reform focuses mainly on schooling, thus narrowing our conceptions of learning, and the resources that could be brought to bear, and its role in remaking our society. If we remain locked in the politics of consumerism, possibilities for transformation are slim.

Our experience in two of St. Paul’s neighborhoods has shown that important learning happens in communities with diverse resources that can be mobilized for children. Without an infrastructure to coordinate activities and support communication at the local and systems level—efforts dissipate. To create a vision and the architecture to support it requires sustained public work undertaken by young people, communities, elected officials and professionals, all who see themselves as citizens working to improve a shared public life.

Many pitfalls exist. When a framework is imposed, it too easily pre-empts work in its nascent stage. If the locus of control moves away from people at the local level, energy drains. Yet grassroots efforts need support of and coordination within larger systems. Working across borders of many kinds is possible. In the doing, we teach ourselves an alternative politics—one that ignites creativity, taps generosity and repositions community people at the center.

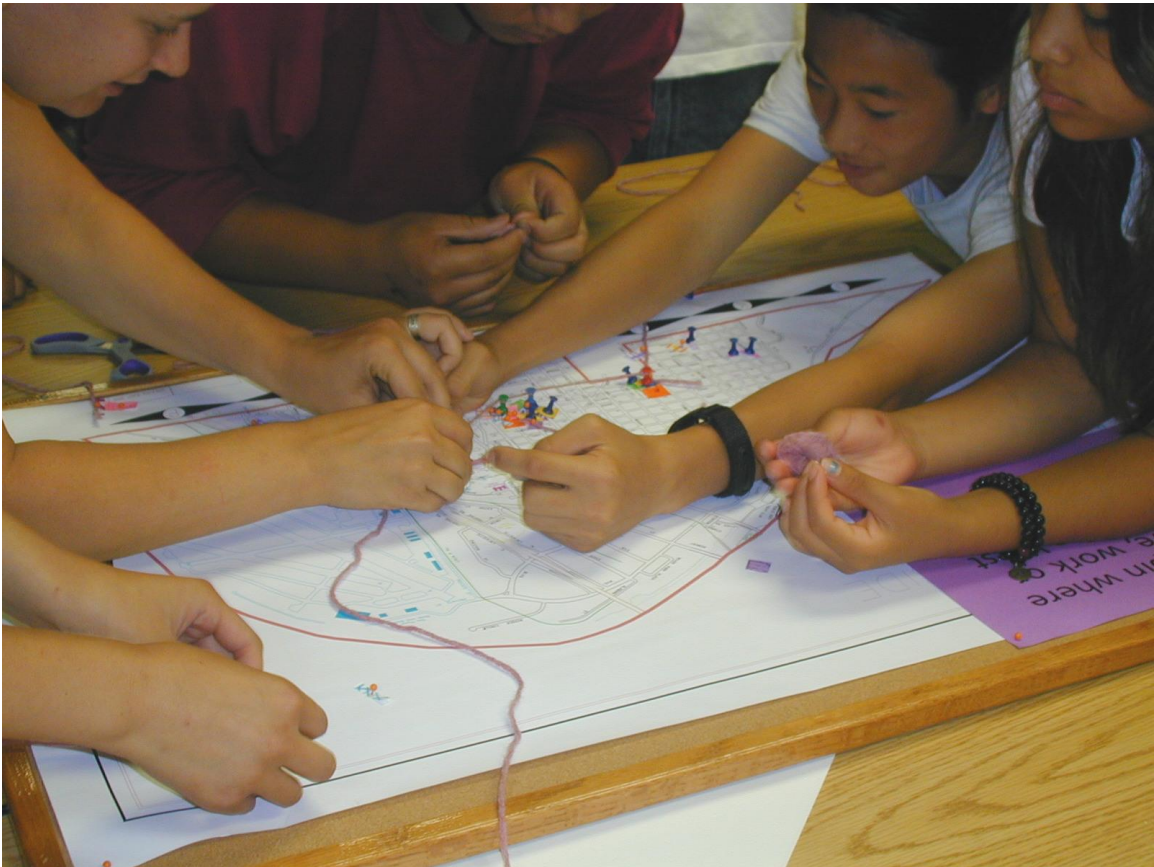
Presently, public education rhetoric spins around achievement gaps, standards and testing, school reform, race to the top, quality programs and teacher training. Policy makers seek quick wins, deliverables, marketable commitments, and the like. After

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Cremin, *Public Education* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 30-31.

awhile, it becomes “noise” that drowns out the real question: How do citizens (including professionals) work together to create a public culture that expands our understanding of learning for children and everyone?

People in St. Paul have begun to craft a new narrative that has potential to reposition neighborhoods and cities as major contributors to education reform. It is a public work aimed to expand our notion of education and to bring excitement and joy of learning to all aspects of our children’s lives.



# Saint Paul's Framework for Youth Success

Through interviews and listening sessions, over 350 parents, youth, teachers, business leaders, youth workers and community members contributed to this framework. The framework calls the Saint Paul community to action to ensure ***all our young people develop the skills, qualities, and knowledge necessary to thrive as productive, contributing citizens in the 21st century.*** Community includes parents, youth, and community members, community organizations, businesses, and the public sector such as schools, the City and county. **This framework is to be read from the bottom up.**

## Community Supports

- Parents are respected and supported in their role and engaged as partners.
- Teachers and youth workers understand and reflect the youth they work with.
- Young people have equitable access to meaningful out-of-school-time learning opportunities.
- Resources to help access and navigate post-secondary and workforce options exist and are used.
- Tutors, mentors and other positive relationships support young people as active agents in their education and learning.



## Saint Paul's Framework for Youth Success

Young people will be best prepared to build their skills as learners, contributors and navigators when they have hope and support to strive for a positive future. It is important for young people to start from a strong foundation where they are grounded in:

- their culture and heritage
- who they are- their strengths, passions and potential.
- positive peer and adult relationship stemming from community, family, and guardians.

This is most likely to occur when the community, in partnership with parents and guardians, provides support to young people to:

- develop a vision for their future and identify their passion(s)
- be resilient, persistent and determined.
- set goals and work toward them

In Saint Paul, we believe each young person will identify their own dreams and goals for the future, yet all will be better able to achieve these when the community, in partnership with parents and guardians, support young people as:

### LEARNERS

*Young people value and are engaged in learning so that they:*

- can identify patterns
- understand the past, how it influences the present and how the present will influence the future.
- Are literate in terms of reading and writing, information, and technology
- Observe and solve problems using critical thinking
- Employ creativity and creative thinking

### CONTRIBUTERS

*Young people are co-creators of a greater good and engaged in efforts larger than themselves through:*

- Civic engagement, service learning, and volunteerism
- Stewardship of their communities and environment
- Work-life and internships

### NAVIGATORS

*Young people can traverse different situations successfully and are able to:*

- Make positive, healthy life choices while declining involvement in risky behavior.
- Traverse within diverse social settings and norms (e.g. workplace, family and friend settings, school, cross-culturally)
- Communicate well in social and interpersonal situations.
- Access resources (e.g. out-of-school-time, post-secondary, workforce, physical and mental health resources).

The following community supports are important to ensure every young person can be a successful learner, contributor and navigator. The public sector, in the partnership with the community organizations should commit to ensure:

- **Parents and guardians are engaged in decision-making while being respected and supported in their role**
- **Teachers and youth workers reflect and understand the young people they work with.**
- **Equitable access to relevant and consequential out-of-school-time learning opportunities for all youth in Saint Paul.**
- **Tutors, mentors and other community supports are in place and used to support success in formal education.**
- **Resources to access and complete post-secondary options are available and utilized.**