Getting the Community In
Community Education is the process that connects schools, communities, and families to provide an environment for kids and adults to learn.

—Steve Parsons

One of the most powerful predictors of strong community support for schools is the corresponding strength of a school district’s community education program, according to research done in Minnesota that assessed the level of support for public education (Morris, 2005a). For a group of Minnesota school leaders who were looking for ways to build better grassroots community support for public schools, the findings of that research affirmed the value of investing in community education to support traditional K–12 programs.

Survey Findings
Among the key findings of the study was that the relationship between community education and community support held true across the state. Other findings included:

- Participants in community education programs rate the quality of education provided by their school districts higher than nonparticipants.
- Participants in community education programs have more favorable impressions of the superintendent, the central office administration, and the school board. The increase in the favorable rating occurred in every age group and household type, including seniors, parents with adult children, and parents of existing students.
- Participants in community education programs are more positive than nonparticipants about their district’s financial management.
- Participants in community education programs are better informed about their district than nonparticipants.

In the study’s executive summary, Morris (2005b) wrote:

In general, Community Education program participants are better informed and view their school district much more positively than non-participants. The impact of Community Education programs goes far beyond simply providing opportunities beyond the K–12 educational experience. It significantly alters perceptions about the entire educational enterprise. (p. 2)

The 80/20 Rule
Funding for public schools is one of the largest investments a community makes, and every household in a community makes that investment through some form of local,
state, and federal tax. One hundred percent of households share in that cost, yet approximately only 20% of families in any given year have school-age children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). That means 80% of the investors are paying taxes and receiving no direct service. Yes, the altruistic perspective that U.S. citizens are preparing tomorrow’s leaders and workforce is true, but to most people, today’s marketplace is much more immediate and concrete. Developing programs and services that appeal to a broader audience can help build support for public schools, as long as it doesn’t take away from the core mission of the schools.

The other 80/20 relationship is the time students spend in traditional classrooms versus the waking time they spend outside of school (assuming 16 waking hours per day and 180 student contact days each year, during which educators have six hours of student contact). It makes good business sense to encourage community members to do two things: make maximum use of the capital investment they have in their community schools during nonschool hours and become partners in the development of students.

Positive Experiences Are Key
As school leaders increase community support, they can learn a great deal from developing relationships with marketing, branding, and public relations professionals who traditionally serve businesses. Public education is more competitive and market-driven today because of increased parental choice, and the business world can provide some important lessons. Building community support for public schools and developing powerful brand loyalty for consumer products have many similarities. Both are seeking people so passionate about their relationship with the product or organization that they become loyal and passionate supporters.

Harley Davidson motorcycle riders love their bikes so much that they often get tattoos with the Harley Davidson logo. Although loyal supporters of public schools usually fall short of having school tattoos, they can be equally passionate about their loyalty. As Harley Davidson shows, a key to success is finding ways to fully engage customers in an integrated brand experience. People who own a Harley Davidson motorcycle don’t simply possess a bike; they live an experience. They become part of a community that shares their passion and sense of identity.

The same can hold true for public schools, although it doesn’t happen by accident. The process of engagement has a prescribed sequence. First, school leaders must inform the community about the great things that are happening in schools. Second, school leaders need to find ways for community members to get involved. School leaders must invite community members into schools, ensure that they have a great experience, and invite them back and make them frequent participants. Third, school leaders must ask community members to share the good things about what is happening in schools with others in the community. At this point, schools and community members have had shared experiences and have developed trust. This is how schools develop loyal and passionate supporters.

Implications for School Leaders
So what does all this mean for school leaders who are already scrambling to find the time and energy to meet increasing demands and expectations? It means that thinking differently and working smarter to develop community support can lead to a significant return on the investment.

Think Holistically
Every resident of a community is a potential learner. Thinking holistically begins by changing how each learning community is defined.
For example, Robbinsdale Area Schools in suburban Minneapolis is a district of approximately 14,000 K–12 students, 6,000 preschoolers, 50,000 households, and 100,000 total learners. By describing the district in these terms, the Robbinsdale school leaders can begin the process of engaging the entire community in the school district’s work and mission.

The Art of Educating the Community
Any time leaders connect the school and the community, they are educating the community. Successful school leaders are already doing many things that facilitate that relationship. This process doesn’t necessarily require school leaders to do more—just to think differently, work smarter, and more fully engage a broader community to enhance programs and practices that already exist. There are many ways to do this, such as:

- Inviting older adults to be the audience for the dress rehearsal of a school play
- Asking community businesses to provide internships and mentorships
- Partnering with local religious institutions to provide after-school tutoring
- Assigning student projects that address problems in the community

More Fully Understand Community Education
Community education has citizen engagement and lifelong learning as its core values. It is a means of identifying a community’s needs and addressing them by fully utilizing community resources. Because it is flexible and responsive to the different dynamics of every community, it looks different in every community.

If one could compile a composite of all the various programs and services that exist in schools throughout the United States, the list would be ever-changing and might include:

- Early childhood education and school readiness programs
- Early childhood family education
- Parenting education
- Before- and after-school programs and services
- Youth development, service learning, and youth leadership programs
- Academic support for students
- Adult enrichment
- Programs and services for older adults
- Community volunteerism in school
- Business and community partnerships
- Coordination of classroom speakers and special presentations
- Adult literacy and basic skills
- Adult English as a second language classes and citizen classes
- Family literacy programs
- Workforce development programs
- Community use of facilities
- Full-service community schools

A New Perspective for a New Reality
Community education has been in existence in the United States for more than 60 years and the processes and programs related to it have positively affected students, families, and communities. The biggest pushback to community education has come from leaders within the school district who question the return on the investment. The data are now clear. Connecting schools to the needs of the community and engaging the community in the work of the schools mutually benefits all concerned. It also results in increased community support, political capital, and partnership potential for the entire public school system. PL

REFERENCES


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