



Building Mutually-Beneficial Relationships Between Schools and Communities:

The Role of a Connector

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This report describes and analyses a successful effort to create a “school-community connector,” a person whose job it is to find and build relationships with a wide range of neighborhood “assets” -residents, voluntary associations, local institutions, businesses- and then to connect them to the neighborhood school and its assets -teachers, students, space, equipment, just to name a few. Dozens of such connections were facilitated, resulting in significant benefits to both the school and the community. This report documents the strategies and methods used by the connector, and provides examples of the tools employed.

Any school or community leaders interested in pursuing this type of initiative, please contact the ABCD Institute at abcd@northwestern.edu.

— John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann

I. A History of the Neighborhood School

In the last few decades, a gulf has opened between many local communities and the schools within their boundaries. The “neighborhood school” has often lost its identity and now is simply what remains once magnet schools, charter schools, contract schools, small schools, academies and any number of additional educational options are removed. (Although not all of these kinds of schools have broken relationships with their surrounding community, many do.) Now, many neighborhood schools carry a kind of bad reputation. If a student isn’t smart enough or lucky enough to get into any of the aforementioned alternatives, they ‘end up’ in the neighborhood school.

And yet, many of us remember the “neighborhood school:” a place in which every community institution had a stake; a place where students and parents knew teachers and administrators as active parts of a larger community; a place where students knew they were safe and where their actions were monitored not only by the staff but by the neighbors. The school down the block was “our school” filled with “our kids”.

The sad irony of this shift in the community/school relationship is that, as the relationship disintegrates, research shows the ever-increasing necessity of a positive relationship for schools to succeed. Strong relationships based upon trust and cooperation amongst teachers, principals, parents, and community residents can and do play an important role in improving schools and student performance.

When parents and community members are engaged in the life of the school, the resources available for teaching and the learning environment expand. When teachers and principals build trust with each other and with parents, they can develop a common vision for school reform and work together to implement necessary changes in the school. And, an intersecting set of relationships among adults (parents, teachers, service providers) can provide a holistic environment in which children are raised with a unified set of expectations and behaviors.

The relationship between the school and other com-



munity institutions such as community organizations, businesses and churches can also be understood in this way. Interpersonal relationships built between individuals across these institutions provide the glue for innovative collaborations on the institutional level. These partnerships strengthen relationships among people in the entire community. Building the collective capacity for schools to thrive in this way has a direct impact on student achievement. (See Appendix 1 for research abstracts.)

So, if the relationship between communities and schools is fractured at a time when we need positive relationships more than ever, how did these relationships fall apart and what can we do to repair them?

Becoming Strangers

The tendency of both schools and communities to regard each other with a great deal of distrust is prevalent. Each has developed a sharp eye for the weaknesses of the other. It’s not difficult to find professional educators who characterize communities, including parents and other residents, as uninformed “amateurs,” hardly qualified to contribute systematically to the education of young people. The communities outside the school often appear to be unpredictable and foreign to them. Racial and class prejudices can contribute to a pervasive wariness, even fear. Finally, school professionals often experience community activists as enemies, expecting far too much from the school and not appreciating their hard work.

This distrust is, of course, a two-way street. Parents and community leaders often regard the schools within their neighborhood as fortresses that are in-

integration and educational innovations offered by a variety of specialized schools has created many community situations in which the local school has few local students. The local school becomes seen as a kind of redoubt occupied by strangers.

This situation, in which the school and the community see each other as strangers to be feared, discounted or avoided can lead to the kinds of school violence that have caused so much concern recently. 'Invading groups of strange kids' having to travel through 'strange, threatening neighborhoods' create situations that can escalate out of control. What should be a haven of safety for young people becomes a frightening and often harmful environment.

Whether or not a neighborhood has ended up dealing with these unintended consequences, the school-community relationship is broken and needs to be renewed. This is a report on one creative initiative that repaired this relationship.

The History of Calumet HS and Auburn Gresham

Calumet High School in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, was in need of a radical turnaround. Drop-out rates and reports of violence at Calumet High School, the largest public school serving the youth of Auburn Gresham, were increasing, and the number of students graduating with high school diplomas was decreasing. Chicago Public School (CPS) administration recognized that Calumet High School needed change.

Calumet had been the neighborhood high school for students from Auburn Gresham through much of its

history. During the first half of the 20th century, Auburn Gresham became home to waves of European immigrants moving to Chicago. But Auburn Gresham underwent a demographic change during the 1960s and 70s. In the 1960s alone, some 40,000 whites moved out, while 47,000 African Americans moved in, raising the population to 69,000. By the 2000 Census, the community's population of 55,928 was 98 percent African American.

Despite the relative prosperity of Auburn Gresham's solid core of home-owning, working families, the economic situation also shifted. The shuttering of the steel mills and the downsizing of the railroad industry in the mid 70's created financial challenges for neighborhood families. Like many urban neighborhoods, Auburn Gresham began to suffer from disinvestment, though many of its institutions remained intact. As the community struggled, its leaders worked to keep a good quality of life. Concern over Calumet High School and its ability to educate the children of Auburn Gresham was universal.

Not a New Story

The story of a school that was failing to meet the needs of its students and community despite valiant attempts to improve instruction, was not new in Chicago. In 1988, then Secretary of Education William Bennett declared Chicago's schools to be the "worst in the nation," as students were consistently performing below national averages on standardized exams, and drop out rates were at an all-time high.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Chicago implemented numerous reforms aimed at decentralizing control and empowering local communities and schools with more decision-making power in an attempt to increase student performance.

But in 1995, when the success of these reforms came into question, Mayor Daley took matters into his own hands by taking control over the school system, placing a his appointed CEO in charge. Later, the Federal No Child Left Behind Act began holding public school districts accountable to the public. As of 2001, if a school did not meet a certain degree of "Adequate Yearly Progress" on standardized assessments of students, it could be labeled a "program improvement" school and given a certain number of years to improve. If the school did not improve, it would be at risk of closing. In the meantime, students would have the opportunity to leave their



neighborhood school in search of a better, “succeeding” school.

It was in this environment of increased accountability that Mayor Daley and Chicago Public Schools Superintendent Arne Duncan created Renaissance 2010, an initiative to create 100 new small schools in Chicago by the year 2010. New schools could take the form of charter schools, contract schools, or performance schools. Regardless of the form the schools took, each school would be a small school with a high degree of control and autonomy. Yet, in compliance with No Child Left Behind, each school would also be subject to a high level of accountability.

As it was clear that Calumet High School was failing to meet students’ needs, it was scheduled to be closed. The CPS Administration invited Perspectives, a successful Charter School operator, to take over Calumet High. At first, it may have seemed like a wonderful opportunity for Auburn Gresham.

But the community residents no longer trusted the top-down initiatives that had failed them so often in the past. The community reacted with hesitation to the new charter school. Under the Renaissance 2010 new schools initiative, all school operators interested in using a CPS building for their new school had to engage a Transitional Advisory Council (TAC), composed of community residents. Frustrated with the impenetrable bureaucracy of CPS, TAC community members and parents were concerned that an “outsider” school would be out of touch with the needs of the community. They were unconvinced that success with students in another community meant that Perspectives could meet the needs of their community.

All of the conditions for conflict between the new school and the existing community were in place. But the resulting relationship was not at all what might be expected.

II. Why School-Community Connections Are Important

Today, Perspectives Calumet High School Principal Glennese Ray explains, “at first, Auburn Gresham didn’t want us. But we were patient and showed them that we love them. And now they’re starting to

love us back.”

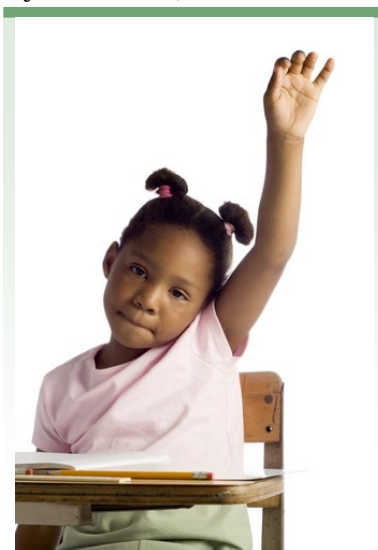
How did that happen? The school and the community entered into a partnership—a partnership created and nurtured by a person hired by Perspectives to build relationships, a “community connector”. The central role of the “connector” and the results of the connections he made for both community and school are the subject of this report.

This new kind of partnership, in which both the school and the community contribute directly to the strengthening and development of each other, can provide a firm foundation for both educational renewal *and* community regeneration. To achieve this important goal, creative education and innovative community builders must begin to work together to discover new ways to mobilize the many and varied resources of local schools as essential components of on-going community development efforts.

Each local school should be seen not only as an “educational institution” but also as a rich collection of specific resources which can be used for strengthening the social and economic fabric of the entire community. At the same time, educators must see their local community as active, strong and full of assets. Successful communities come in all shapes and sizes, all economic levels, urban and rural, and they possess many assets, which, once mobilized and connected make community life rich and vibrant.

The community environment in which a school is located has sets of preexisting complexities that school operators must navigate. But once relationships are established and continually cultivated, these relationships support school recruitment (in the case of charter schools), after-school programming, student safety, parental involvement, and student achievement.

Often educators are not prepared to successfully engage community organizations, residents, and faith-based institutions in sustainable and mutually beneficial ways. But, when



schools intentionally build asset-centered relationships with their local communities—the role of a “community connector”—functional relationships emerge based on the strengths of the institutions, agencies, and residents involved.

On the shoulders of local residents, organizations, businesses, and schools sit a great responsibility: The educational and economic future of public school students. Ensuring a high quality public education in a globally competitive environment requires an effective use of local capacities, assets, and networks.

ABCD

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University has been researching issues surrounding school-community connectedness since the early 1990s. ABCD provides effective strategies for rediscovering and mobilizing the layers of resources already present in any community. Founders John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann provide a blueprint for these strategies in their book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (1995).

According to ABCD, no plan, solution or organization from the outside the community can duplicate what is already there. Although some resources from outside the community are needed, the key to lasting solutions comes from within. The gifts and skills of residents and the assets of the physical community are always the starting place.

1. **Individuals.** Every individual has gifts she or he brings to the group. The best and most creative communities are aware of these gifts and provide opportunities for them to be given. Simply discovering and inventorying individual gifts is not enough. Find ways to create connections between gifted individuals. Making these connections, building relationships, is the heart and soul of community building.
2. **Associations.** Individuals who share common interests and goals form associations. Garden clubs, fraternal organizations, bowling leagues, book clubs, and church groups connect individuals to others who share their interests. Associations build long-lasting, multi-faceted, relationships where none previously existed.
3. **Institutions.** All communities, no matter how poor, have within them a set of insti-

tutions that can support the individuals and powerful associations found there. Parks, churches, businesses, libraries and especially schools all have a role to play. They can be involved with the local community as the property owners, gathering centers, economic entities and incubators for community leadership.

4. **Physical environment.** Other assets include the physical environment of a community, its greenspaces, roads, facilities, transportations centers and gathering places.
5. **Economy.** The local economy is a complex web of unique local resources, enterprises, and dynamics that generate wealth and distribute benefits, even in low-income communities.
6. **Stories.** Finally, every community has a rich fabric of positive stories that define it. Finding a way for a community to tell those stories, to itself and to the world outside it can unleash tremendous potential.

Taken together, all of these assets listed provide strong bedrock upon which any community can build. Successful strategies for community development in neighborhoods are *asset-based*, *internally-focused*, and *relationship-driven*. Finding and connecting existing assets is the most important work a community can do.

Connectors Connect

Connectors, according to Malcolm Gladwell, are “people with a special gift for bringing the world together.”

What makes someone a Connector? The first—and most obvious—criterion is that Connectors know lots of people.

They are the kinds of people who know everyone. All of us know someone like this. But I don’t think that we spend a lot of time thinking about the importance of these kinds of people.

When educators communicate effectively and involve family and community members in activities focused on student behavior, schools report fewer disciplinary actions with students from one year to the next.

Sheldon & Epstein, 2002

All of us do know someone like this. And most of us don't often think about their importance. But to build a strong school-community relationship, the Connector becomes a central figure. In the stories that follow, the Connector hired by Perspectives is featured as he attempts to build relationships between the school and other community assets. In each case, both the school and the community benefit from his work. The lessons learned from this particular school-community partnership can be useful to any school wishing to engage its local community for any of a myriad of reasons-- school recruitment, after-school programming, student safety, parental involvement, and student achievement.

III. A School-Community Connector for Perspectives Calumet and Auburn-Gresham

From the moment it became clear that Perspectives would move into Auburn Gresham in November of 2005, the faculty and staff worked diligently to understand how they could best engage Auburn Gresham community members. In December, they invited the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) to conduct a half-day workshop with their staff to help them learn how to understand the interests of the community and how to respond proactively and effectively to community concerns.

The ABCD Institute also suggested that Perspectives hire a staff member whose role was to intentionally connect the school to the community. Often, a school's attempts to connect to their local communities fail because it is no one's specific job responsibility to consistently engage local people and develop local networks. Or, the principal undertakes limited and sporadic efforts to connect with a community group. During February of 2006, Perspectives, with the support of ABCD, began looking for someone to fill this role.

After a phone and in-person interview, the "Community Connector," was selected and hired in April 2006 to develop strong community connections between the Perspectives-Calumet Campus and the

Auburn Gresham Community. He was Ray Thompson.

Born and raised on the south side of Chicago, Ray Thompson's curiosity about Chicago's neighborhoods led him on solo adventures often cautioned by his grandmother. Traveling by public transit and on foot, the big shoulders of Chicago became apparent through its architecture, home styles, and tightly knit ethnic neighborhoods. From the Boys Scouts on 41st and King Drive to graduate school on east 60th Street, Ray realized people in neighborhoods mattered most.

After 7 years in child welfare and 3 years of supporting community-based organizations and organizing efforts, the opportunity with Perspectives Charter School emerged.

Ray's primary responsibilities initially included the following:

- To initiate and lead a process of "asset mapping," continuously discovering the resources represented by Calumet's many community resources, including community residents and parents; churches; voluntary associations; public private and non-profit institutions; and physical assets.
- To build relationships and robust school-community connections, and explore the ways in which community resources can contribute to the school, as well as the way in which the school can contribute to strengthening the community.
- Work with the Perspectives Calumet Advisory Board as a bridge between the school and various sectors of the community; as an interpreter



of the school to the community and visa versa; as a negotiator of win-win scenarios; as a broker among assets.

- Open up opportunities for teachers; students and parents to partner with community groups and organizations in mutually beneficial activity.
- Assist in recruiting of students to the campus.

Within a month, Ray developed and began executing a strategy that included the completion of an Asset Map of the area within a 2 mile radius the school and a Listening Campaign with 22 business owners, community organizations, and residents on their vision for the new school. As we will see, the data and information collected from the Asset Map and Listening Campaign interviews were used to cultivate relationships that would ultimately benefit the new school's culture and student life while thoroughly engaging staff and teachers in Auburn Gresham Community life.

Ray was not a resident of the Auburn Gresham community, but was familiar with the area. "At first there was some discomfort on my part", he says. "But it

turned to be really important because I wasn't trapped by my experience. It helped me build trust later when I began the interviews." The new school was set to open in September 2006 and Ray had 4 months to engage community members. With very few original contacts, he created an asset map of Auburn Gresham that targeted community organizations, businesses, and resident associations.

Much of the Asset Map was completed using community resource guides and internet maps, but Ray frequently walked the community's commercial areas and residential blocks to observe the community in action. In this manner, many unlisted, but relevant organizations and businesses were discovered that had meaning and history with residents.

The Asset Map directed initial contact with community members. Although hundreds of organizations and business were discovered, the map targeted entities that had the capacity to mutually engage a new public charter school in Auburn Gresham.

2006 Asset Map –Auburn Gresham

Community Organizations	Social Service Agencies	Local Business	Churches	Public Offices/ Services
Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corp.	Catholic Charities	LaSalle Bank (now Bank of America)	Mt. Hebron	Foster Park
Beloved Community	Grandfamilies	Citibank	Third Baptist Church	MLK Skating Rink
Target Area Development Corp	A Knock at Midnight	Best Buy	Trinity UCC	21st Ward Office
SIMP, Inc.	St. Sabina Employment Resource Center	Lagnippe Restaurant	Providence Missionary Baptist Church	17th Ward Office
Kidtek	Chicago Christian Health Center	Soul Food Unlimited	Victory Apostolic	Marshall Library
The Ark	Englewood Health Center	Perfect Peace Café		St. Senator J. Collins' Office
National Block Club University	S.O.S. Children's Villages	L.H. Day School		
	St. Leo's Veteran Resource Center			

Listening Campaign Questions

Developed by John Kretzmann (of the ABCD Institute) and Ray Thompson (Community Connector)

1. What makes Auburn Gresham different from its surrounding communities?
2. What makes Auburn Gresham similar to its surrounding communities?
3. Since living in the community can you name and talk about 3 things you like the most about the community?
4. In your opinion what are the biggest challenges the community currently faces.
5. Can you talk about some of the resources in the community that benefit families and youth?
6. When you think of important community leaders who immediately comes to mind?
7. How do you see a revitalized high school participating in the community life of Auburn Gresham?
8. In your opinion, what is the most important thing a school can do for a community.
9. Who else in the community should we talk to?

A Listening Campaign

The listening campaign is an effective tool when initiating relationships in new communities. The listening campaign not only captures important qualitative data that reveals unique connecting opportunities based on community's assets, but is, most importantly, a valuable and organic relationship-building conversation.

"My first goal was to go out and conduct the listening campaign. We did about 21 of those interviews, from political leaders to local residents. And I think those interviews were most useful for building relationships," Ray says. "I was just looking for ways to connect, to show what Perspectives had to bring to the relationships, many of which already existed in the community. Lots of existing organizations were kind of close-knit."

It is important to note that the interviews conducted sought to understand, from the community member's perspective, how a revitalized high school in Auburn Gresham should function to become a success for community parents and students. Additionally, the interview served as a learning tool to uncover ways the school could become an asset to Auburn Gresham.

The campaign uncovered the community's desire to have a high performance and high expectations high school for the families of Auburn Gresham. On average the community simply expected the new school to "educate the students" to the best of its ability and to keep its promises. (See Appendix 2).

TARGET

One of the first attempts to connect was with a local community organization, TARGET Area Development Corporation. Ray felt it was important for community leaders to understand what Perspectives was all about, so he brought a group of leaders from TARGET to visit the existing Perspectives school in the South Loop.

TARGET represented the western edge of Auburn Gresham, and had some skepticism about any outsider groups coming into the community. This visit took the edge off that skepticism, though much convincing would remain. "One of their leaders said to me as we left 'just make sure the Calumet campus is as good as this'." Ray knew

that he had begun to change the community's attitude toward a charter school. (TARGET later became a supporter of Perspectives school safety efforts and currently sponsors a social/emotional learning student organization called VOYCE at Perspectives-Calumet.)

The connecting had begun.

GADC: "How are our kids?"

The Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) concerns itself with business development along the 79th Street corridor in Auburn Gresham. It is especially influential in this regard as it is the lead organization for the New Communities Program (NCP), a development effort spearheaded by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) in 16 Chicago communities. This makes GADC a very powerful presence, as they have the support and money of LISC and the NCP behind them.

Ray began a series of conversations with the Director of GADC. He points out there is a big difference between "conversations" and "meetings": meetings have an agenda, and people can attend meetings and never connect; conversations build trust. "Sometimes, I would just drop by their offices and hang out, talking about whatever—just making myself available and building relationships."

Each of the communities in the NCP had to design a quality of life plan—a community-led plan for development—before the LISC money would flow. GADC's plan had education goals, but they were not fully developed and had no school partner. After many conversations that included the sharing of this information, Perspectives Calumet and GADC realized there was a natural fit. The school and the development group began to cooperate. A series of mutually beneficial events and connections resulted from this cooperation over the next three years.

- In August 2006, the Executive Director of GADC invited Perspectives students in "uniform" to participate in a press conference Mayor Daley scheduled in the community. Students were photographed by the Mayor at the request of the Carlos Nelson, Executive Director of GADC. This was the first official recognition of the partnership.
- In November of 2007, the opportunity to partner in a school-based health clinic was proposed by GADC. The school-based health clinic was a collaborative effort led by the



funding support of Atlantic Philanthropies and the development assistance of Local Initiative Support Corporation, The MacArthur Foundation, and Chicago Public Schools. The clinic was to provide enhanced exposure and learning opportunities for students through comprehensive, on-site health services. "They (GADC) thought of us first, of course, because of the building. But my position was always 'what can we offer to the community'" says Ray. "Not all educators think that way. They want to know what the community can do for them." Today, the clinic is open and serves youth at the school, and eventually will be open to all community residents. "That's a big relationship," says Ray.

- Perspectives has as part of its model a commitment to field study and to internships for their students. Although the school had staff that developed these placements, Ray was able to create links with community organizations and businesses to make these experiences be local ones for Perspectives Calumet students. In the Spring of 2007, 2008 and 2009, over 50 students volunteered for Earth Day activities in Auburn Gresham community. These served as field study days for students. GADC has served also as an internship site for Perspectives students since 2006.
- Engaging students in the community has been easier because of the partnership. "Carlos used our students as volunteers in many projects. He came to the school to work with teachers. This relationship had many paths." In Summer 2007 and 2008, over 20 student volunteers participated in the 79th Street Community Renaissance Festival, sponsored by GADC. During the 2007 and 2008 school year, 15 students helped in the creation of GADC's litter-free zone on 79th St.

In partnership with GADC and the Employment Resource Center of Auburn Gresham, 15 Perspectives Calumet students participated in the Mayor's summer job program in 2008. The Employment Resource Center is an asset to the community funded through the New Communities Program, which has a strong affiliation with city government. These 15 young people directly benefited from this association because their school was connected to GADC.

Something very important changed because of the relationships built between Perspectives Calumet and GADC. "When I first came to Auburn Gresham, all I heard from residents was how bad 'those kids' were," says Ray. "But within about seven months, the conversation--at least at GADC--turned from 'what about those kids' to 'how are our students?'"

The students had regained their place as members of the community.

LH Day School

LH Day School is a private elementary, K-6th grade school in Auburn Gresham. Perspectives Calumet Middle School entry grade is 7th. The relationship with LH Day School began via school recruitment activities. In September of 2006, the CPS held its annual school fair, for parents to learn about school opportunities. One parent whose daughter was graduating from LH Day School came by the Perspectives Calumet booth. This encouraged Ray to visit LH Day School to meet teachers, parents and administrators. Because of contact with Ray, a teacher at the

school visited an open house at Perspectives and discovered there was a natural synergy.

Over 80% of LH Day School's graduating 6th graders attended (and currently attend) Perspectives during the 2007 and 2008 school years.

In addition, the relationship is on-going and extends beyond recruitment. For example, LH Day School students and staff used the auditorium at Perspectives Calumet in 2008 to host their annual school musical. "Again, I felt that what we could offer were our facilities--our beautiful 1500-seat auditorium," say Ray. In a neighborhood that has 12 K-8 elementary schools, convincing parents to leave their school and attend Perspectives at 7th grade is a hard sell. The relationship with LH Day School broke that barrier.

S.O.S. Children's Village

Ray met with the Director of SOS Children's Village, also a newcomer to Auburn Gresham, in July of 2007. SOS is an international organization that provides foster children with pre-screened parent placements in common living spaces. It had recently opened a complex in the community and was addressing the significant issues of foster children in neighborhoods like Auburn Gresham. Ray shared a graduate school connection with the Director of SOS, and met with him to just provide information about Perspectives and build that relationship.

Later, during the 2007-2008 school year, the Perspectives Calumet principal discovered that a high school student was removed from her foster home and put back in a temporary group home setting, causing her to miss classes. The student really wanted to be in school, so the principal turned to Ray for ideas. "I said that I had just met with this new placement facility, SOS, and I would see what I could do." The student's case supervisor spoke with the director of SOS, and the student was immediately placed in their family-style residential home. She returned to Perspectives Calumet and resumed her studies.

"That was a big plus for me," says Ray, "that I was able to use my position as a connector to get this young woman into a supportive home, where she still lives."



Safe Passages Project

Violence encountered on a daily basis by students on their ways to and from school is an increasingly alarming issue. In many cases, the violence is perpetrated on students who come to school from outside the community, or who are seen as outsiders by the community. As the daily news stories created an atmosphere of outrage throughout Chicago, efforts were made by government to address the issue.

The Safe Passage Project was funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services, but its manifestation in Auburn Gresham had the excitement of a real community project. The connections made by Per-

When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement.

Henderson & Mapp 2002

spectives Calumet and Ray had a big impact on how the Safe Passages Project would succeed in the community.

A collaboration that included Greater Auburn

Gresham Development Corporation (GADC), The Ark of St. Sabina, and St. Leo's Veteran's Center emerged from a conversation that began after several Perspectives students became victims of violence during a Fall 2007 dismissal. Because of the new perception of the students as community members, no longer "those kids", the groups came together in a creative way to address the violence. The retired veterans that resided at St. Leo's Veteran Resource Center became paid street monitors, supporting the safety of not only Perspectives students, but also the students going home from St. Sabina's elementary school and Cuffe Elementary, a Chicago Public School.

This collaboration between several community assets—schools, churches and veterans along with the community development corporation—is an example of what can happen in a connected community. Where once neighbors hid in their homes when schools got out, recoiling from the strangers in their midst, the whole community now came together in a creative response to this profound threat. Young and old, government and community, neighbors and parents—a unified front providing protection for "our students".

Ray sees the change as one that changed the whole community. "People were now willing to send their kids to the school. And many people that I had built relationships with told me that if Perspectives had not had an individual whose role was to connect, none of this would have occurred."

As we will see in the next section, many other smaller, yet important, connections were made in three years. Local business provided internship experiences for students, and offered their services in after-school programming. The local park and skating rink have served as recruitment sites for the school. Discussions have been held that could lead to opening the pool at the school to the whole community if funding can be found. Local politicians have appeared at the school and have invited students to appear with them at community events.

Slowly and surely, an older model seems to have returned. Perspectives Calumet is the community's school.

IV. Everybody Benefits

Between 2006 and 2009, Ray Thompson initiated and cultivated dozens of relationships in the Auburn Gresham community that have had a direct impact on the academic success and healthy development of students. Conversely, he created a bridge for community members and organizations to connect to the resource network of Perspectives which included staff, teachers, parents, and students.



Connections Benefiting School from Community

Schools creating community connector roles within their school culture benefit on several levels from connections established:

1. Schools become community members through consistent relationship building, while maintaining high levels of local visibility.
2. The Connector establishes institutional legitimacy in politically complex community areas.
3. Perceptions of students improve. Students are now seen as “children who live in our community”, not scary strangers. Neighbors recognize the assets of the students and the value of their participation in community activities.
4. Community connections strengthen recruitment outreach activities.

Examples from Auburn Gresham:

- Catholic Charities, closely linked to the Faith Community of St. Sabina, agreed to serve as an internship site for freshman and community action site for middle school students;
- Citibank serves as an internship site for students;
- Best Buy’s manager spoke at school’s honor roll breakfast, and later gave a laptop to most improved student at the end of the first school year;
- Illinois State Senator Jackie Collins allowed students to walk with her in the annual Bud Billiken Parade;
- Kidtek, a technology-based afterschool program introduced to Ray by the local alderman ran a summer technology program and, later, added an afterschool program in Perspectives – Calumet High School of Technology.

Connections Benefiting Community from School

Community organizations, residents, and businesses benefit from strong relationships with schools that ultimately support the entire community:

1. Schools represent a central location to share information with community residents.
2. Schools have facilities that can be used as meeting spaces, community conference centers, and sites for community events.
3. Students serve as volunteers and interns in community-based organizations and businesses, achievement, and strengthen school protective factors.

Examples from Auburn Gresham:

- GADC partnered with the school and used school facilities to host a community visioning session for the school-based health clinic planning process;
- The Center for Working Families used the school as site for tax prep for low-income families during report pick-up conferences;
- The Ark of St. Sabina used Perspectives facilities for a Neighborhood Teen Summit on Violence;
- In the Paint Basketball Program used Perspectives gyms as site for summer basketball tournament and recruited students to play in it;
- Local Initiative Support Corporation used Perspectives facilities for Digital Divide seminars.

Connections Supporting Teachers

Teachers can find their work is enhanced by community connections;

1. The Asset Map not only develops meaningful school-community connections, but also creates a resource directory. Teachers and social workers benefit by finding social support services to benefit students and families.
2. Relationships cultivated can contribute to classroom learning.
3. Teachers and staff can participate in community events along with their classes. These experiences can be used to include community history as a reference point for classroom work.

Examples from Auburn Gresham:

- A science teacher had a strong interest in creating a school-based recycling program to extend learning opportunities for students. She was introduced to the recycling expert at Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation, and the teacher and interested students created a recycling program with the support of GADC;
- Every teacher and social worker has a digital version of the asset map to assist experiential learning and in student placements.

Connections Supporting Students

Students benefit individually, in addition to the school:

1. Relationships developed enable students to learn more about their own community. These relationships create stronger links with local businesses and community organizations during after school time.
2. Business owners, residents, and community organizations come to know the students by name. These relationships add to the student's social capital and extend their social networks.
3. Organizations that expressed deficit views of neighborhood teenagers begin to see their potential and ability to contribute to their community. Concerns for the students' well-being increased as the perceptions of residents changed, increasing the number of adults supporting local youth.



Examples from Auburn Gresham:

- Student participation in the annual Earth Day event organized by GADC.
- Student and staff participation in the creation of the community based Litter Free Zone;
- Students volunteered in the Litter Free Zone pick up and drop off days;
- Student, teacher, and principal participation in GADC – 79th Street Renaissance Street Festival;
- Student and staff participation in Lobby Day (Springfield) for increased education funding;
- Student and staff participation in 40 Days of Non-violence sponsored by African American Student Association of School of Social Service Administration (U of Chicago). Event organized by community relations intern.

Changing the Culture

In addition to the benefits outlined above, there are ways in which having a Connector on staff can reshape and renew the school's culture, helping all parts of the school work better together. Some (but not all) are listed below:

Connector Supporting School Culture

School Administration

- Connector serves as community liaison for principal.
- Connector raises administrator's awareness of community based-learning opportunities for students and teachers
- Connector provides direct support to administrators on sensitive community issues that directly affect students (i.e. safety, neighborliness, and mutual respect).

Teachers

- Connector supports lessons plans of teachers by uncovering local experiential opportunities for students.
- Teachers have reported community involvement in the school has positively supported classroom management.

Students

- Students interact with community leaders and residents through school events (i.e. honor roll breakfasts, internships).
- Positive perceptions of school are increased when community residents and organizations participate in school culture and in the school life of students that live in the community.
- High school students report feeling empowered to make positive decisions that benefit others.

V. Lessons Learned

Characteristics of a Good Connector

Finding a Connector is not a simple undertaking. Key to the task is realizing that not everybody is suited to this kind of work. "It would be a mistake to simply add 'community connections' to an employee's job description," says Ray. "A resource coordinator or a social worker is not necessarily suited to be a community connector."

So what goes into successful connecting? It seems there are four basic gifts shared by every connector: the ability to **listen for possibilities**; the ability to **see where the connections are**; the talent to **make these connections**; and the **trust of the community**.

Find A Trusted Listener

Probably the most important characteristic of a connector is the ability to listen. Opportunities to create connections between the school and the community are often revealed in conversations that begin on different topics. A connecting project begins with the Listening Campaign, which provides raw materials for making connections. But those connections can be missed if the interviewer isn't listening or has another agenda in mind. For example, if the interviewer is only listening to discover ways in which a community group can help the school, he or she may miss a way in which the school can be helpful to the community.

Community connections should work in both directions and discerning them requires a careful listener who is attuned to all possibilities for connections. A connector needs both a good ear and the vision to see opportunities in all kinds of information. There's a kind of "Aha!" talent in a good connector: a talent that recognizes affinities between people who don't yet know each other and acts to make that necessary introduction that can benefit both parties.

None of this can happen if the connector is not trusted by the community. Gaining the trust of individual community members takes time and

means coming through on promises. Ray reminds us that it took him almost a year to build this trust. But without it, nothing would have been accomplished.

Connecting is a gift. Not everybody can do it and no one can be trained to be a connector.

Connectors should be valued and paid.

Building connections successfully is about connectors using their relationships effectively much more than it is about ideas, concepts, or methods. A connector can lead a school to the right opportunity and open the door. Creating a common interest in the lives of local children is very important work, work with real value.

A connector also recruits other connectors, enrolls connection partners, carefully listens for connection opportunities, and supports those connections. All of this work needs day-to-day attention by someone valued and paid.

Ideas from Seattle

The City of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods undertook a connection project in the 1995, called Involving All Neighbors (IAN). Rather than send out a group of City Hall bureaucrats to encourage neighborhood involvement, the Department of Neighborhoods turned to the neighbors themselves, asking for directions. Local people found it easy to identify those folks who were the best connectors. Over time, folks involved in IAN were able to identify several characteristics shared by the community connectors.



The IAN list to the right is a good place to start developing a job description. (See Appendix 3 for the Job Description for Ray's job at Perspectives.)

IAN believes an effective community connector has a certain set of skills:

- Strongly believes that every person belongs and has contributions to make and gifts to give to the community;
- Works to build community in his or her life;
- Is always on the lookout for what's happening in the neighborhood and knows its places, events, groups and people;
- Looks for opportunities for people to connect with others and contribute their skills;
- Enjoys meeting people and bringing together people with common interests;
- Gets involved and asks others to get involved;
- Enjoys challenges and doesn't give up;
- Stays flexible, adjusts expectations, and knows that things take time;
- Focuses on one person at a time and considers how that person's interests and skills can be assets for the community;
- Finds ways for others in the community to sustain new connections;
- Finds ways to take care of and renew him- or herself;
- Believes that anything is possible.

(From *Involving All Neighbors: Building Inclusive Communities in Seattle*, by Carolyn Carlson. Published by the City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods.)

Thoughts on a Connector

Raymond Thompson

Connectors come in all shapes and sizes. They are found in the mahogany covered walls of academia and on our urban streets, where liquor stores sit perpendicular to churches. In a connectors field of interest contradictions abound. A single mother with three children has found a friend in an older woman who lives alone in the apartment below. Taxpaying residents decide to shovel the alley they share because “we can’t wait for the city”. From an apartment building to an inner city alley, many connections are waiting to be made. A connector exists to initiate the link.

Connectors have a natural curiosity about people. Questions are asked and a conversation spontaneously takes off. Gifts are shared and a new friend is made. Gifts and capacities are aligned to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods. Community partners are created and mutual interests are met that directly involve and benefit residents. Sometimes bridge building is needed and a connector is the contractor initiating its construction, relationship by relationship.

A connector values relationship above and beyond what a relationship can produce. Social and financial outcomes are beneficial, but a senior’s love of reading shared with children who are frequently at home alone after school until their mother returns from work can’t be tangibly measured. Though it can be shown that these interactions are investments of time and self that result in hard benefits seen in safe communities, productive and caring school environments, and responsive local government. A connector understands results, but is not results driven. The challenges in communities are complex, but are overcome by getting down to grassroots levels where human interaction takes place and all systems emerge.

Connectors rely on residents for information and learn how residents use information to benefit themselves. Through these observations a connector sees natural synergies in neighborhoods based on the gifts of its residents and the capacities of its institutions. Through relationship the connector helps residents see the potential in the neighborhoods collective assets. Shifts in perception occur and the once half empty glass is now half full or running over, depending on our ability to be inclusion minded. Community changes blossom from empowered residents interacting and sharing their gifts and information. A connector’s primary role is to ignite that action and then let residents and community organizations imagine, create, and build based on their gifts and capacities.

A connector is never satisfied with traditional employment, though one may find them hiding out in social service agencies, community organizations, or doing neighborhood based organizing work. They can be found influencing others to become more interdependent and sharing helpful information. Some connectors may work from an Emersonian-like base of self reliance, motivating residents to rely upon their gifts and local capacities to create economic opportunity. And other connectors seek to weave our invisible and often excluded neighbors back into the fabric of our daily community life. Despite the many variations of connecting and connectors, all connectors understand that community life suffers when neighbors are not in relation. Our communities are the foundation of our civic, social, and economic lives. Community is also the source of creative change and innovation. As globalization and digital technology spreads information (and our attention) far and wide, a connector gathers people to reflect on their local lives. In this reflection community is strengthened, local opportunity emerges, and sustainable change ensues powered by active human relations and capacity.

Appendix 1

Research and Abstracts

Catsambis, S., & Beveridge, A. A. (2001). Does neighborhood matter? Family, neighborhood, and school influences on eighth grade mathematics achievement. *Sociological Focus*, 34, 435-457.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) suggest that protective factors “are individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events; increase an individual’s ability to avoid risks or hazards; and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future.” When these protective factors are part of a school’s culture, school connectedness increases.

School Connectedness is defined as the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about them as individuals as well as about their learning. Community engagement in school decision-making processes and community partners that can provide services to impact the social and health needs of students are part of school connectedness. A school dedicating resources to intentionally connect with their local communities and neighborhoods can strengthen school connectedness through the work of a Connector.

Epstein, J. L. (in press). Results of the Partnership Schools-CSR model for student achievement over three years. *Elementary School Journal*.

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Sanders, M. G. (in press b). Building school-community partnerships: Collaboration for student success. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Sheldon, S. B. (2003). Linking school-family-community partnerships in urban elementary schools to student achievement on state tests. *Urban Review*, 35(2), 149-165.

Sheldon, S. B. (2004). *Testing the effects of school, family, and community partnership programs on student outcomes*. Paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA.

Simon, B. S. (2004). High school outreach and family involvement. *Social Psychology of Education*, 7, 185-209.

Henderson, A. T. & Mapp, K.L. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence - The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory www.sedl.org/connections/

Warren, M. R. (2004). *Linking Community Development and School Improvement: Service, Organizing and Development Approaches*. Prepared for the Ford Foundation

Appendix 2

Interviews – Collective Samples

(Compiled from 21 separate interviews. Responses to questions 6 and 9 omitted due to personal names)

1. What makes Auburn Gresham different from its surrounding communities?

- Schools in Auburn Gresham are not successfully educating neighborhood youth.
- Auburn Gresham has strong political alliances.
- A lot of senior citizen property owners.
- Since closing of CHA buildings a large influx of families living in rented homes in area causing increase in crime.

2. What makes Auburn Gresham similar to its surrounding communities?

- Area of the city with strong black communities.
- No economic engine due to being a bedroom community.
- Underemployment, unemployment
- Economic diversity, economic range of citizens from low income to upper middle income.

3. Since being in the community can you name talk about 3 things you like the most about the community?

- Redevelopment of 79th Street
- Architecture (bungalows)
- Children in community are not hardcore, bad kids – just misguided.
- Opportunity to work with community organizers who are invested in community revitalization.

4. In your opinion what are the biggest challenges the community currently faces.

- After several years of low crime rates, crime is back and open air drug markets have returned to the community.
- Schools in community continue to receive failing grades.
- From an educational perspective, parent involvement is a major challenge.
- Lack of Black male involvement with male youth in community.

5. Can you talk about some of the resources in the community that benefit families and youth?

- St. Sabina is a major resource.
- Target Area Development Corp.
- Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corp.
- South Side Tabernacle

7. How do you see a revitalized high school participating in the community life of Auburn Gresham?

- Find creative ways to increase parental involvement.
- Keep community informed.
- Collaborate and participate in community life. Cultivate reciprocal relationships.
- Create opportunities for students to participate in the community building process.

8. In your opinion, what is the most important thing a school can do for a community?

- Educate the students
- Just educate the students and provide opportunities to expose students to new things and increases their awareness of opportunities.
- The first goal is to educate the students; second goal should be to increase parental involvement. Come and be a part of the community, not just a regular 8-2pm school.

Appendix 3

Job Description

POSITION ANNOUNCEMENT

Community Connector

About Perspectives Charter School

Perspectives Charter School is a remarkable small school in Chicago with a deep commitment to quality education. Chartered in 1997, it is having a profound impact on the students and families it serves, and more than 500 students are on the waiting list. Centered on Perspectives' unique character education curriculum called "A Disciplined Life"©, Perspectives encourages academic rigor, high expectations and "college for certain." Perspectives has earned a national reputation for its innovation as a small school.

Perspectives Charter School is dedicated to the mission of providing urban students with a rigorous and relevant education that will prepare them for life in a changing and competitive world. Perspectives will help students further become intellectually reflective, caring and ethical people engaged in a meaningful life. The school presently serves 325 students grades 6 through 12 with a single campus in the South Loop of Chicago.

Perspectives has the great privilege of opening two new schools in the Calumet High School facility at 8131 S. May in Chicago. One Perspectives-style school will open in August 2006 and a second, Perspectives-style school of technology will open in 2007. Students will be selected through a lottery and students from the Auburn Gresham neighborhood will fill 75% of the openings.

About the Position

The Community Connector position is being created to develop strong community connections between the Perspectives schools in Calumet and the community. Reporting to the Director of External Affairs and working closely with the Calumet campus team, primary responsibilities will include:

- Initiate and lead a process of "asset mapping," continuously discovering the resources represented by Calumet's many community resources, including community residents and parents; churches; voluntary associations; public, private and non-profit institutions; and physical assets. Create a database of community resources uncovered from the asset mapping process.
- Cultivate and nurture strategic community-school partnerships with residents, local institutions and community based businesses in the Auburn-Gresham community (including local police district). Develop mutually beneficial relationships that remain consistent with the goals and mission of Perspectives Charter School.
- Work with the Perspectives Calumet Advisory Board as a bridge between the school and various sectors of the community; as an interpreter of the school to the community and vice versa; as a negotiator of win-win scenarios; as a broker among assets. Additionally, work with Perspectives Calumet Advisory Board to develop a continuous needs assessment process to determine the social-emotional needs of youth who are entering the school (i.e. gang violence prevention, drug use prevention, etc.) Use community based relationships in prevention efforts.

- Open up opportunities for teachers, students and parents to partner with community groups and organizations in mutually beneficial activity.
- Assist in recruiting of students to the campus. Promote Perspective's success throughout the community.
- Attend meetings on growth-issue related community issues as a representative of Perspectives Charter School.
- Perform community-based research as needed to enhance community- school partnerships.
- Plan, implement and coordinate special events for community members and students to enhance community-school partnerships (i.e. school open houses for teachers and parents/students; student recruitment fairs).

Qualifications

The successful candidate will be a creative matchmaker with a strong interest in quality education for urban youth and deep belief in the power of school/community alliances. S/he will have a bachelor's degree and a minimum of five years increasingly responsible experience. S/he will possess strong organizational and planning skills; strong writing and communication skills; interpersonal skills; and an ability to handle a multitude of tasks and deadlines. S/he will be a good listener and will possess the ability to maintain and grow relationships while working effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. S/he will be self-motivated, able to recognize and communicate strategic opportunities, and able to work collaboratively in a results-orientated environment. Resourcefulness, creativity, capacity for hard work, and a sense of humor will help make the candidate successful in this position of crucial responsibility.

Position requires a flexible schedule with some evening and weekend work. Knowledge of the Calumet community is a big plus.

Other Information:

This is a wonderful opportunity for the right person to build an outstanding, community-school partnership from the ground up, and to lead many aspects of school and community alliance-building for this ambitious school and its new campus.

If you are interested in assistance with
developing a School-Community Connector
Initiative, please contact:

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