

Volume 3, No. 4
August 2002



ISSN 1532-642X

Rural Roots

News, Information, and Commentary from the Rural School and Community Trust

Connecting Communities and Classrooms

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In the landscape of education reform, connecting communities and schools is an integral part of many diverse approaches to improve K–12 education. Many reform initiatives support an innovative curriculum that moves beyond the traditional classroom to incorporate community involvement into students' academic life. As a teaching method, "using the community as context" is adapted into many of these different reform models, some of which include place-based education, service-learning, environmental education, the creation of community schools and academically-based community service through university-school partnerships.



A STREAMS student doing fieldwork for Crooked Creek Water Assessment.

Though the models are different, they share a belief that K–12 education needs to include real-life experience and use the community as context for learning. This underlying common attitude echoes the words of nineteenth century educator John Dewey:

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. That is the isolation of the school, its isolation from life.¹

¹John Dewey, *School and Society*, in Martin Dworkin, ed., *Dewey on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), p. 76–78.



A STREAMS student shows a survey analysis of her independent study.

Quite a few education reform initiatives seek to reconnect schools to real-life learning experiences, by using the community as context as a way to connect community and the classroom. Several organizations have emerged as leaders in this approach.

Service-Learning

Service-learning—when students serve others as part of their core education—is one of the better known terms in community-connected education reform. Activities such as volunteering and doing community service projects are key components of service-learning,

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which aims to make students better citizens. As a teaching method, it has grown exponentially in the past decade. Since the Corporation for National and Community Service was founded in 1993, \$43 million in federal funding has been awarded to school districts across the nation to incorporate service-learning into curricula.

The term "service-learning" was coined in 1969. Betsey McGee, director of the National Service-Learning Partnership at the Academy for Educational Development in New York City, calls service-learning "a pedagogy of choice" for both place-based learning and community schools. "By definition, service-learning is place-based since most service is done in the place students live," she said.

The National Service-Learning Partnership, founded in 2001, currently has more than 2000 members. The partnership primarily supports leaders and advocates and aims to make service-learning a core part of every child's education. The establishment of this organization is one more indication that service-learning is here to stay.

Expanding Environmental Education

In its eighth year, the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER) is a coalition of 16 state education agencies that has developed a model to improve student achievement called Environment as an Integrating Context (EIC).

The EIC model goes beyond what many people think of as traditional environmental education. EIC's approach to learning is not designed only to incorporate environmental issues into the curriculum; rather, it is the impetus with which they engage students to connect learning to their local environment. SEER Director Gerald Lieberman defines environment as encompassing both the "natural *and* community surroundings."

SEER works with state education agencies to implement the EIC model in schools. This year, SEER has a total of 82 EIC schools in 12 states: California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New Jersey, South Carolina, Texas and Washington.

The EIC approach is based on research that the group's staff has conducted in schools over the last eight years. One of these schools was Huntingdon Area Middle School in rural south central Pennsylvania.

In 1991, two of the school's teachers, Frederic Wilson and Timothy Julian noticed that students had a lot of "down time" during study halls.

"We realized that traditional curriculum was disconnected from the real world of young people in this rural community and that students are more engaged in activities that take place outdoors, have a direct impact on their families and community, and give them some control over their educational experience," Wilson said.

To remedy students' ennui during study halls, Wilson and Julian began a supplemental study in environmental ecology. Students were eager to participate and shortly thereafter, the interdisciplinary program, Science Teams in Rural Environments for Aquatic Management Studies (STREAMS), was integrated into the sixth grade curriculum. Through experiments and outdoor fieldwork, STREAMS students study topics such as storm water run-off, erosion, sedimentation, nutrient enrichment, wetlands, groundwater, and the effects on waterways of acidity and household pollutants.

STREAMS is a unique learning program because it combines four academic disciplines (language arts, math, science and social studies) with an after school Environmental Club that students can join after they have completed the core curriculum. The club has approximately 60 students per year in sixth through eighth grade. Wilson, the faculty advisor, said that many students in high school often come back to participate in community service projects.

Huntingdon Area Middle School's STREAMS and Environmental Club have had tremendous success over the last several years. After discovering during fieldwork that a sewage leak was polluting a local stream, the middle-schoolers launched a three-year campaign to correct the problem. The students wrote a grant proposal and obtained \$250,000 to replace three miles of broken sewage line. The good work

Principles of Place-Based Education

Place-based education, as practiced by more than 700 schools associated with the Rural School and Community Trust, embraces the following six principles:

- The school and community actively collaborate to make the local place a good one in which to learn, work, and live.
- Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live. They practice new skills and responsibilities, serving as scholars, workers, and citizens in their community.
- Schools mirror the democratic values they seek to instill, arranging their resources so that every child is known well and every child's participation, regardless of ability, is needed and wanted.
- Decision-making about the education of the community's children is shared, informed by expertise both in and outside the school.
- All participants, including teachers, students, and community members, expect excellent effort from each other and review their joint progress regularly and thoughtfully. Multiple measures and public input enlarge assessments of student performance.
- The school and community support students, their teachers, and their adult mentors in these new roles.

did not stop there. Students also assisted in designing, funding and constructing a wetland on school property to reduce problems with storm water runoff in the community. They created and distributed a publication on household pollutants; started a school recycling program; and provided data for a county water-quality study. The students provided research and offered suggestions that resulted in a 50 percent reduction in food waste at their school as well as significant reductions in other district schools. One of the most recent STREAMS projects was the Sanding Stone Creek Water Assessment. This past April, the Huntington students earned a Presidential Environment Youth Award for their achievements. The STREAMS program and Environmental Club demonstrate what K–12 students can do given the opportunity—not bad for a program that started during study hall.

Community Schools

Establishing schools that bridge a student's academic environment and a community's social environment to serve as a dual center for learning and community enrichment is the goal of the Coalition for Community Schools in Washington, DC. The Coalition is an alliance of more than 170 education, youth development, family support, health and human services, and community development organizations including the Rural Trust, that promote full-service community schools where educators and communities collaborate to support student learning. Community schools typically combine the assets of a community and local school to provide better learning opportunities for families as well as students. Many community schools are open after normal school hours to provide additional services to students and families. Most community schools integrate community-oriented service-learning into the academic curriculum to enhance students' education.

"We want build a united movement for community schools," said Martin Blank, director of the Coalition for Community Schools. "There are a variety of models of what a community school is,

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ResourceCenter

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Periodicals

- "Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are" by Gregory Smith appeared in the April 2002 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*.
- "Community Schools" by Ira Harkavy and Martin Blank appeared in the April 17, 2002 issue of *Education Week*.
- *Community Service Journal* is published three times a year in support of teaching practices that build community. It showcases innovative educational strategies, practices, and curriculum that involve teachers and students in meaningful work within their communities. More information about the journal is available at <http://www.vermontcommunityworks.org/cwpublications/journal/cwjjournal.html>.

Books, Reports and Presentations

- *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education* by Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal can be purchased for \$12.00 from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. Order information is available at <http://www.ael.org/eric/orderf.htm>.
- *100 Days of Learning in Place: How a Small School Utilized 'Place-Based' Learning to Master State Academic Standards* by James Lewicki is available for \$5.00 from the Rural School and Community Trust and can be ordered by filling out an order form at http://www.ruraledu.org/pub_order.html.
- *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for American Schools* is a report that was released in January 2002 by the National Commission on Service Learning. It is available on the Web at <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/>.
- *Service-Learning: A Movement's Pioneers Reflect on Its Origins, Practice and Future* by Timothy K. Stanton, Dwight E. Giles and Nadinne I. Cruz is available at bookstores nationwide.
- *Inside Full-Service Community Schools* by Sue Maguire and Joy G. Dryfoos is available at bookstores nationwide.
- "Contextual Teaching and Learning Strategies in High Schools: Developing a Vision for Support and Evaluation" was presented by Elliott Merdrich, Sarah Calderon, and Gary Hoachlander of MPR Associates at the Roundtable on Instructional Strategies and Structures for Improved Learning in High Schools in Washington, DC in July. Call (202) 973-0244 to obtain information on how to obtain a copy.

Organization Web Sites

- Corporation for National and Community Service:
<http://www.nationalservice.org>
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse:
<http://www.servicelearning.org/index.html>
- Rural School and Community Trust:
<http://www.ruraledu.org/index.cfm>
- The Orion Society:
<http://www.orionsociety.org>



Left: Raymond Green, senior at University High School, sells fresh fruits and vegetables at the Farmer's Market, part of the University Nutrition Initiative. Above: STREAMS students participate in a wetland study.

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but there are common underlying core principles. We want to promote community schools on a large scale and weave together the best aspects of different models.”

The Coalition of Community Schools emphasizes the development of programs and services in five areas: quality education, youth development, family support, family and community engagement, and community development. Service-learning is a key element at the intersection between quality education, youth development and community development.

One such school is the O’Farrell Community School for Advanced Academic Studies in San Diego, California, a charter school established in 1990. The school serves 1,500 sixth to eighth grade middle school students and features additional services beyond the traditional classroom setting that serve the community on-site. The school is open from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., much longer than the traditional school day to accommodate a variety of services for students and parents.

A unique aspect of the O’Farrell Community School is the social service wing on campus called Family Support Services, a collaborative effort between the County of San Diego, Heath and Human Services Agency, O’Farrell Community School and SAY San Diego. Twenty-five community partners come to the school to offer a wide range of

services to families. Services include tutoring, mentorship programs, mental health counseling, parenting classes, job preparation classes and cooking classes to name a few. Family Support Services also provides 12-week programs for students focusing on self-awareness, self-esteem and personal planning.

“We focus on the whole child—their academic, emotional and social needs,” said Mary Skrabucha, family support services coordinator. “We realize that if we tell families to go somewhere else for services, they aren’t likely to do it. This way, kids and parents get everything they need emotionally and socially from the school.”

For students, O’Farrell Community School has as an active service-learning program within the community school. Students are required to complete 12 hours of community service per year outside of the regular school day. Students perform three different types of service (community service, school service and home services) and are expected to discuss their service-learning experiences and connect them to their role as citizens within their community.

Academically-Based Community Service Through University-School Partnerships

College-level academics and the effort to establish community schools have

formed a unique marriage with the Center for Community Partnership (CCP), housed at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. The CCP incorporates the basics of service-learning (which enables students to study their community surroundings to supplement their academic curriculum) and the community school philosophy, but goes one step further to engage students as active problem-solvers within their communities as part of their academic work. CCP calls its approach “academically-based community service.” Dr. Ira Harkavy, director of CCP, and Cory Bowman help coordinate the university’s resources that support the overall effort and serve as liaisons to the Philadelphia school district.

While CCP’s program embraces service-learning and community schools models, “academically based community service is more than an aggregate of services or participating in a community service project,” said Bowman, co-director of the center. “We believe in linking active problem-solving to the core academic curriculum.”

Academically-based community service at the CCP is the key ingredient to involving the university’s students with local schools in West Philadelphia. More than 130 courses focused on academically based community service are available to University of Pennsylvania students (about 40 courses in a given academic year). Historically, most classes have been in the humanities and social sciences, but today, other disciplines such as the health professions schools and the sciences are joining the effort to combine academic work with community service.

Of the several CCP school and community initiatives, one of the most noteworthy is the Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI), formerly called the Turner Nutrition Awareness Project. The project emerged from a partnership between Turner Middle School and an undergraduate anthropology seminar in 1990. Initially, college students began collecting dietary data on middle school children. Rather than the middle school children serving as “guinea pigs” in the project, they actively participated with the college students in research and data collection.

By 1994, students were beginning to realize that inner-city school-age children were not getting all the recommended dietary requirements due to poor access to fresh fruits and vegetables (caused in part by the lack of full-service grocery stores in inner city Philadelphia). As a result, students took action to improve nutrition in West Philadelphia. Today there are several student-run operations at three area schools to promote good nutrition in the community. These include an after school fruit and vegetable stand; a farmers' market open on the weekends; school gardens; a community fitness program free to parents and community members; and an urban agriculture and micro-business development at the high school.

UNI connects University of Pennsylvania undergraduate courses with courses in an elementary, middle, and high school in West Philadelphia, creating a pre-K through 16+ curriculum focused on improving community health. The project is focused on researching and developing integrated approaches that will create substantial and broad community participation. Accordingly, changing the curriculum is at the core of UNI's school-based school and community improvement approach. UNI has developed and implemented a curriculum that teaches core subjects (math, social studies, language arts).

"Many service-learning and community school initiatives are supplemental to the academic curriculum, often only an after school activity," said Bowman. "These need to be linked to the core of the school day in order to have staying power."

Bowman believes that one of the ways service-learning and community schools can succeed is to integrate the resources of local schools with local higher education institutions. In the past, many service-learning initiatives have been short-term projects rather than having a permanent place in the curriculum. Bowman said this is because "local schools don't have institutional resources to support long-term service-learning."

Bowman thinks program partnerships like the one between the University of Pennsylvania and local school districts may be the answer for instituting

academically based community service on a larger scale. "Colleges and universities should be and can be an institutional anchor for service-learning and community schools projects," said Bowman.

Today, CCP is a leader in the effort to expand university-school collaborations. Partnering with the National Center for Community Education, CCP has developed a training and technical assistance program on the higher education-assisted community school model with support from the Charles Mott Foundation. Three-day workshops are held each spring to promote higher education-community school partnerships. This past spring, 70 representatives from higher education institutions, schools and community groups attended.

Funding Initiatives Using the Community as Context

No matter which education reform model is used, programs that link communities and schools inevitably need funding. In order to support reform models like environmental education, service-learning and place-based learning, the Funder's Forum on Environment and Education, nicknamed F2E2, has been educating grant-giving corporations and foundations since 1997 about place-based education and the funding opportunities that exist within the intersection of the environment and education.

Typically funders have priority areas for grantmaking such as "education," "community service," or "environment." F2E2 aims to show funders the value of programs that combine traditional program areas. Today, there are more than 200 funders involved in the F2E2 network.

F2E2 serves as a clearinghouse of information for funders to think about what unique funding opportunities are available that best serve schools and communities. The network publishes a newsletter, hosts and listserv and sponsors briefings and conference sessions at the regional and national level. F2E2 challenges funders to "think outside the box" for programs that can make a real difference.

Jack Chin, founding director of F2E2, believes that funders are "putting

resources out there, but [it] is not being done in such a way that it aggregates and integrates the assets that link school and community, which could add up to something more meaningful and have a greater impact."

Different Approaches, Common Benefits

Although there are several approaches to use a community as context for enhancing student learning, most education reform models have a common desire for students to view learning as relevant to the world around them, to connect with their community and in the process, become concerned and contributing citizens of that community. Using community as the context for educational experiences allows students to reach out to the larger world and place real value in their education as they realize that they too, can make a difference in society. And these programs are getting results. Studies cite better student achievement, revitalized teaching, enhanced youth development, increased citizenship and improved quality of life as reasons to support and implement community-connected education programs. Clearly, it's working.

Internet Addresses for Organizations Mentioned in this Article:

Center for Community Partnership

<http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/>

Coalition for Community Schools:

<http://www.communityschools.org/>

Forum on Environment and Education

<http://www.f2e2.org/>

National Service-Learning Partnership

<http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/>

State Education and Environment Roundtable

<http://www.seer.org/index.html>