



*THE EDUCATING NEIGHBORHOOD:
HOW VILLAGES RAISE THEIR CHILDREN*

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Throughout North America, one of the most popular mottos is the African saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Hardly anyone disagrees with its premise. However, there are very few “villages” that actually engage in this practice. Child raising is thought to be largely the domain of families and schools. However, a village is much more than family or school and holds more educational resources than either.

The educational assets of the village include the knowledge of neighborhood residents, the clubs, groups, and associations that are citizen-based learning environments and the local institutions (businesses, not-for-profits, and government bodies). They all provide incredible learning opportunities. It is these neighborhood educational assets that are activated in a village that raises its children. However, in most communities, these invaluable resources are unused and disconnected from the lives of young people.

There is a forgotten history of village child raising. In our neighborhood research we have discovered this history by asking people over 50 years of age to describe their experiences in their neighborhoods when they were children. Most of these people responded in a similar fashion. They say that things have changed a great deal in their neighborhoods since they were children. They remembered how various people on the block taught them all kinds of things from singing to stamp collecting to bicycle repair to history. They also remembered how the people on the block expected them to behave and would tell their parents immediately if they stepped over the neighborhood boundaries. Finally, they spoke of their sense that they were the children of all the people on the block or neighborhood.

When we asked people under the age of 40 to tell us about their childhood neighborhood experiences, we rarely heard the story told by their seniors. Instead their story was about school, youth groups (from Boy Scouts to gangs), and programs. Their neighbors have vanished from the story.

It appears that in one to two generations, villages have lost their power to raise children. Their functions have largely been transferred to schools. This transfer is reflected by the fact that in the last generation, schools have been asked to take responsibility for the health, safety, food, recreation, behavior, moral values, and entrepreneurial development of young people. (For a chronicle of new functions assigned to schools since 1900, see attached exhibit.) Viewed from the school perspective, this transfer has created teachers who often feel overwhelmed by all of these responsibilities. This transfer of neighborhood functions to the classroom has so distorted the teacher’s role that she or he is diminished in capacity to teach those things for which they were prepared—the basic educational curriculum.

The transfer of neighborhood functions to schools has been a lose-lose history. The neighborhood has become impotent and often angry at the behavior of young people with whom they have lost touch. The school has become overburdened as it attempts to be an all-purpose child raiser that fails at this impossible task. As a result, school-neighborhood tensions are increased as schools try to respond by getting parents to support the school rather than seeking neighborhood initiatives, which would result in the village restoring those functions that allow it to raise a child.

The resolution of this school-neighborhood dilemma depends upon identifying and mobilizing the educational capacities of the residents, associations, and institutions in the neighborhood. Surprisingly, every neighborhood is rich with these educational resources. However, very few communities are organized to identify and connect these resources to the young people. A village with the capacity to raise children must first be able to identify the three most important teaching resources in the neighborhood.

The Knowledge of Local Residents

The first universally available educational asset is the knowledge local residents hold that they are willing to teach young people.

We have been engaged in research assisting people in local neighborhoods to identify the local teaching knowledge. One example of this knowledge was documented in a low-income African American neighborhood in Chicago. The local neighborhood organization initially met with 17 residents residing on 3 local blocks. They asked the residents what they knew well enough to teach local young people and whether they would be willing to do that teaching without pay. The following table demonstrates the teaching knowledge that these residents were willing to freely share with their village young people.

Teachables of 17 Residents of 3 Blocks in Chicago’s Woodlawn Neighborhood

Entrepreneurship Job creation Job training Marketing Strategic planning Physical fitness Basic accounting Economics How to review a credit report Credit quality Banking Dietician Grammar Organizing events English Public speaking Presentational etiquette Journalism for beginners	Home schooling Basic etiquette Breastfeeding techniques for first-time moms First aid Hygiene Self-esteem Life skills for youth Knitting Computer technology Mathematics Skating How to be a good neighbor Real estate Reading comprehension Sewing Handcrafting Cooking
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It is notable that the neighbors can teach some traditional school topics but, of even more significance, they can teach subjects that would not usually be taught in the school, such as vocational skills, moral values, constructive relationships, financial economic skills, self-esteem, and recreation. In teaching these kinds of subjects, the neighborhood is recovering its function as child raiser. The school is relieved of functions and can receive assistance in supplementing typical school topics.

In the neighborhood where the residents provided this teaching information, the neighborhood association runs an after-school “youth at risk” program. The 40 young people involved are sent to the neighborhood association by the school because they create disturbances, don’t learn, or won’t learn. The probability is very high that most of these teenagers will be dropping out of school.

From a school perspective, these youth are viewed as “unlearners.” The neighborhood organization took the topics that neighbors were willing to teach and presented them to the youth at risk, asking which of the topics they would like to learn. The following table indicates the responses the teenagers gave regarding what they wanted to learn.

Topics Youth Would Like to Learn

TOPIC OF INTEREST	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	MALES	FEMALES
COOKING	23	12	11
BANKING	14	6	8
COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY	13	8	5
HOW TO START A BUSINESS	12	7	5
PAINTING	11	6	5
REAL ESTATE/BUSINESS	11	7	4
SKATING	11	5	6
TYPING	11	7	4
BLACK HISTORY	9	5	4
PHYSICAL FITNESS	9	3	6
ENGLISH	8	5	3
MATHEMATICS	8	5	3
PARENTING	8	3	5
READING	6	4	2
CARPENTRY	5	3	2
FIRST AID	5	0	5
GRAMMAR	5	3	2
LIFE STYLES FOR YOUTH	5	3	2
MARKETING	5	2	3
BASIC ACCOUNTING	4	1	3
HOW TO HAVE FAITH	4	1	3
JOURNALISM FOR BEGINNERS	4	2	2
READING A CREDIT REPORT	4	2	2
READING COMPREHENSION	4	3	1
SEWING	4	1	3
ETIQUETTE	3	0	3
GARDENING	3	1	2
PUBLIC SPEAKING	3	0	3
SELF-ESTEEM	3	2	1
WORLD HISTORY	3	2	1
GOOD NEIGHBORING	2	1	1
DICTION	1	0	1
GEOGRAPHY	1	1	0
KNITTING	1	0	1
PLUMBING	1	0	1
SHEET METAL	1	1	0

This table indicates what the teenagers want to learn. It is notable that their highest priority is learning that would assist them in getting jobs. Because these youth are very likely to drop out and be jobless, connecting them to the village's vocational learning opportunities is an important opportunity for changing life futures by connecting what young people want to learn with what neighbors want to teach. Without this connection, these youth at risk will begin appearing on lists of unemployed gang members whose probable future is incarceration.

The Neighborhood Associations

The second educational asset in neighborhoods are the clubs, groups, organizations, and associations to which the local residents belong. These are usually smaller face-to-face groups where the members do the work and they are not paid.

We have done research with local neighborhood groups helping them identify their local associations. There are always many more than local people realize. One example is the town of Spring Green, Wisconsin, with a population of 1,600. A team of residents identified 82 associations and interviewed the leaders of the 60 associations listed below.

60 of the 82 Associations with Names in the Town of Spring Green, Wisconsin, Population 1,600 (2013)

4PeteSake
 American Legion Post 253
 Badgerland Girl Scout Troop 2669
 Bloomin' Buddies Garden Club
 Cub Scout Pack # 38 Spring Green
 Bunco Babes
 Christ Lutheran Church
 Community Theater Association (Gard)
 Concerned Citizens of the River Valley
 Cornerstone Church of Spring Green
 Driftless Area Book Club
 FFA Organization (at River Valley High School)
 Friends of Governor Dodge State Park
 Friends of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway (FLOW)
 Friends of the Spring Green Community Library
 Green Squared Building Association
 Greenway Manor Volunteers
 Habitat for Humanity, Lower Wisconsin River
 Knights of Columbus
 Knitters at Nina's
 Kops for Kids

Mew Haven, Inc.
Miracles on Hoof
Mostly Mondays Poetry Society
Older & Wiser Land Stewards (OWLS)
Pineland Association
River Valley Area Community Choir
River Valley Boosters Association (athletics)
River Valley Mom's Group
River Valley Music Boosters
River Valley Players
River Valley Soccer Association
River Valley Stitchers
River Valley Youth Football Club
Rural Musicians Forum
River Valley High School Alumni Band
River Valley High School Madrigal Choir & Jazz Vocal Group
River Valley High School Senior Service Learning Class
Skills USA (at River Valley High School)
Solstice Jazz Band
Spring Green Area Arts Coalition
Spring Green Area Chamber of Commerce
Spring Green Area EMT District
Spring Green Area Fire Protection District
Spring Green Area Historical Society
Spring Green Arts & Crafts Fair Committee
Spring Green Cemetery Association
Spring Green Community Church
Spring Green Community Food Pantry
Spring Green Dog Park
Spring Green Dolphins
Spring Green Farmers Market
Spring Green Film Club
Spring Green Golf Club, Inc.
Spring Green Lions Club
Spring Green Literary Festival
Spring Green Senior Citizens Club
Stitch 'n Bitch
Unity Chapel, Inc.
Wyoming Valley School Cultural Arts Center

This list demonstrates the diversity of neighborhood, civic, vocational, environmental, and social interests. The study found that the chairpersons identified “learning” as the most common reason that people join these associations. They are not only topical learning opportunities, but they also provide invaluable social relationships that build trust—both qualities that every youth would learn to their advantage if they were connected to one or more associations.

The 60 associational leaders were given a list of various kinds of neighborhood improvement functions that are often fulfilled by local associations. They were asked whether their association was engaged in any of these activities. If they answered “no,” they were asked whether they thought their group would engage in the activity if asked. The following table indicates their responses.

Activity	Yes, Already Involved	Not Involved, Willing	Probably Willing	Probably Not	Uncertain
Welcome Newcomer	15	21	7	17	1
Beautification	14	8	25	0	3 slight, 1 possibility
Park & Recreation	14	12	7	22	1 possibility
Youth	34	4	8	14	0
Disabilities	22	16	6	17	0
Seniors	30	10	4	11	1 consider it
Homeless/Hungry	24	8	6	18	2
Natural Disasters	18	12	6	21	1
Arts & Culture	34	4	1	13	5
Families	30	8	3	18	0
Health, Phy. & Mental	28	7	4	20	1 maybe
ESL	0	6	6	47	1,1 maybe
Family/Child Abuse	7	12	6	33	2,1 maybe
Youth At Risk	12	10	4	30	2
Environment	17	10	5	23	2
History & Heritage	17	14	6	18	1 might
Recruit Teenagers	15	13	6	16	0

It is of particular significance that 34 groups say they are now involved with youth, while 12 indicate that they would probably become involved if asked.

When asked whether they are involved with youth at risk, 12 groups report that they are while 14 more say they are probably willing, if asked. This data indicates that many associations are in some way involved with young people and that many more could be engaged if they were asked. This makes clear the largely unrecognized contributions and possibilities of local associations as teaching/learning venues.

Special note should be made of the research that emphasizes the importance of young people being connected with adults in order to develop their vocational, civic, and moral values. Local associations are the most readily available opportunities for young people to establish adult relationships in a productive setting that can develop their gifts and capacities as citizens.

Local Institutions

The third neighborhood educational resource is the local institutions—businesses, not-for-profits, and government institutions, which include libraries, parks, schools, and museums. These local institutions have been widely recognized as learning resources by universities and high schools with community-service programs. These programs place students with the institutions in order to broaden their knowledge beyond traditional school topics. These kinds of student-institutional relationships have many benefits, including specific vocational knowledge, relationships with productive adults, networking opportunities, understanding norms of a workplace, creative and entrepreneurial experiences, and activities that build self-esteem.

In addition to these community-service relationships, students can also be connected to other adults who are performing productive activities. An example would be students who are paired with the mayor and elected council people, directors of government departments, hospital administrators, foundation staff, police officials, and entrepreneurs of all kinds. These experiences, in addition to providing wonderful learning opportunities, also increase the commitment of young people to their neighborhood and its civic life.

Activating an Educating Neighborhood

In many places, a common description of a local community is that it is a “welcoming neighborhood.” A related definition would be an “educating neighborhood”—a place where all of the learning assets of individuals, associations, and institutions are identified and mobilized to create a village that raises its children. There are at least three steps that lead to an educating neighborhood:

1. Partners in Education

The organization for carrying forward the vision of an educating neighborhood includes as many educating partners as possible. These partners can include neighborhood associations, other interested associations, the library, the local newspaper, the community foundation, the local government, the chamber of commerce, and the school.

While local school leaders might be key to initiating the partnership, it may be that they’re better positioned to initiate and inspire the neighborhood teaching resources rather than taking a leading role. Schools are often overburdened and not looking for another function. However, they can be the precipitant that brings the partners together in a group that might be called the Neighborhood Education Partnership. An effective partnership is best achieved if its members are not only visionaries, but also are representative of the educational resources that must become activated together if the educating neighborhood is to be achieved.

2. Identifying the Neighborhood’s Educational Resources

In many neighborhoods, the village is not raising the children because the local educational assets are not visible. An initial goal of the Neighborhood Education Partnership is to make visible the invisible resources and identify their willingness to take on a neighborhood education role.

This “visibility” could include identifying: 1) the teaching knowledge of residents in the neighborhood; 2) the associations in the neighborhood and their willingness to become an educational resource; and 3) the array of institutions and their willingness to join in the educating process. This undertaking can be done by the partners, sometimes in cooperation with local colleges and agencies.

While thus far we have focused on the role of adults teaching young people, it is equally important that this visibility initiative also seeks to understand the skills, abilities, and interests that young people are prepared to contribute to neighborhood life. In this sense, people of all ages become educating assets—everyone a teacher and everyone a learner.

When this “map” of the abundant educational resources is made public, it usually leads to a new vision of the neighborhood, its strengths, and its educating possibilities.

3. Connecting the Educational Resources

Once the partnership has identified the vast array of educational resources, the next step is developing methods that connect them to young people. This function could be performed by staff of the Neighborhood Education Partnership. It might also be a significant function of the partners themselves. The local newspaper or college could also be an implementing resource.

The task is to weave young people into the fabric of the adult community so they can learn and become contributors to the neighborhood’s life.

The School’s Advantage in Promoting a Partnership for Neighborhood Education

School reform in the United States has usually meant getting parents contributing to the school and the school becoming more efficient, technological, and test-driven. While these reforms may be helpful, they fail to energize a neighborhood’s commitment to educating. Implementing this commitment may be as important as traditional school reform ideas.

An educating neighborhood is a vital part of school reform because it can result in:

- Lightening the burden on teachers who are now asked to do many things that are impossible for them to do. They can return to the kind of teaching for which they were trained, thus increasing their effectiveness.
- Eliminating the we-they relationship that exists in many places between schools and their local neighborhoods. Instead, all of the neighborhood educates and is as responsible for youth as are the schools. Once residents and associations and institutions take on educating roles, they will understand the school as a helpful part of a neighborhood learning process instead of as the institution responsible for raising the children.
- A stronger neighborhood with, not only capacities to teach, but with new commitments to be responsible for the socialization of young people.
- A reduction of so called “youth problems.” We have created a mislabel called the “youth problem.” In fact, there is no real youth problem. There is a real problem—weak neighborhoods that have lost the capacity to raise their children. Schools and youth agencies have not been very successful dealing with the youth problem because their village is not organized to raise the children. An educating neighborhood creates the context for young people and neighbors to act together as citizens on behalf of the common good.

Learning to Support Functioning Neighborhoods

In recent years, professionals and several leaders of institutions have become very clear that they will not be able to fulfill their goals if the neighborhood is not organized to fulfill its unique functions.

Professionals in the health field have been active for years in energizing local neighborhoods to undertake health-giving activities because they know that medical care is a very limited tool for improving health.

In many progressive communities, the police leadership is very clear about their limits in dealing with crime. They have developed community policing as a method to support neighborhood organizations that will take on functions providing security police cannot begin to provide.

In many cities, elected officials and department heads understand that, unless local neighborhoods are organized to take on productive functions, the city or town will decline. They know that local government has clear limits of its capacity to create safe, healthy, economic neighborhoods. Without organized productive citizen action, the government will fail.

It is much less clear that school professionals understand what health, police, and municipal officials see so clearly. Often, they are still trapped in a paradigm in which the school dominates the field of education by indicating that the key question is, how can the neighborhood help the school? In this era, the key reform question is, how can the neighborhood recover its educational functions so schools can once again be respected partners in neighborhood progress?

This is a new educational era. Villages must recover their capacities to raise children if schools are to become all that they can be. An effective school of the future will be a partner in that neighborhood recovery. When that recovery is achieved, the village will be able to say, "These are our children. We care for and educate them. Our school is our best ally as we pioneer the new work of becoming a village raising our children."

Exhibit

Functions Added to Public Schools

(Excerpt from: Schools Cannot Do It Alone by Jamie Vollmer, Enlightenment Press, 2010.)

From **1900-1910**, we shifted to our public schools responsibilities related to:

- Nutrition
- Immunization
- Health (Activities in the health arena multiply every year.)

From **1910-1930**, we added:

- Physical education (including organized athletics)
- The Practical Arts/Domestic Science/Home Economics (including sewing and cooking)
- Vocational education (including industrial agricultural education)
- Mandated school transportation

In the **1940s**, we added:

- Business education (including typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping)
- Art and music
- Speech and drama
- Half-day kindergarten
- School lunch programs (We take this for granted today, but it was a huge step to shift to the schools the job of feeding America's children one-third of their daily meals.)

In the **1950s**, we added:

- Expanded science and math education
- Safety education
- Driver's education
- Expanded music and art education
- Stronger foreign language requirements
- Sex education (Topics continue to escalate.)

In the **1960s**, we added:

- Advanced Placement programs
- Head Start
- Title I
- Adult education
- Consumer education (resources, rights, and responsibilities)
- Career education (options and entry-level skill requirements)
- Peace, leisure, and recreation education (Love the 1960s.)

In the **1970s**, the breakup of the American family accelerated and we added:

- Drug and alcohol abuse education
- Parenting education (techniques and tools for healthy parenting)
- Behavior adjustment classes (including classroom and communication skills)
- Character education
- Special education (mandated by the federal government)
- Title IX programs (greatly expanded athletic programs for girls)
- Environmental education
- Women's studies
- African American heritage education
- School breakfast programs (Now some schools feed America's children two-thirds of their daily meals throughout the school year and all summer. Sadly, these are the only decent meals some children receive.)

In the **1980s** the floodgates opened and we added:

- Keyboarding and computer education
- Global education
- Multicultural/Ethnic education
- Nonsexist education
- English-as-a-second-language and bilingual education
- Teen pregnancy awareness
- Hispanic heritage education
- Early childhood education
- Jump Start, Early Start, Even Start, and Prime Start
- Full-day kindergarten
- Preschool programs for children at risk
- After-school programs for children of working parents
- Alternative education in all its forms
- Stranger/danger education
- Antismoking education
- Sexual abuse prevention education
- Expanded health and psychological services
- Child abuse monitoring (a legal requirement for all teachers)

In the **1990s**, we added:

- Conflict resolution and peer mediation
- HIV/AIDS education
- CPR training
- Death education
- America 2000 initiatives (Republican)
- Inclusion
- Expanded computer and Internet education
- Distance learning
- Tech Prep and School-to-Work programs
- Technical Adequacy Assessment
- Postsecondary enrollment options
- Concurrent enrollment options
- Goals 2000 initiatives (Democrat)
- Expanded talented and gifted opportunities
- At-risk and dropout prevention
- Homeless education (including causes and effects on children)
- Gang education (urban centers)
- Service learning
- Bus safety, bicycle safety, gun safety, and water safety education

In the **first decade of the 21st century**, we have added:

- No Child Left Behind (Republican)
- Bully prevention
- Anti-harassment policies (gender, race, religion, or national origin)
- Expanded early child care and wrap around programs
- Elevator and escalator safety instruction
- Body Mass Index evaluation (obesity monitoring)
- Organ donor education and awareness programs
- Personal financial literacy
- Entrepreneurial and innovation skills development
- Media literacy development
- Contextual learning skill development
- Health and wellness programs
- Race to the Top (Democrat)

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