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**Community-Based Development  
And Local Schools:  
A Promising Partnership**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

As the challenges to community-based organizers and developers escalate, so also do the creative new responses that community builders invent. Many of these inventors now recognize that rebuilding low- and moderate-income communities “from the bottom up” requires the mobilization and participation of all of the “assets” at hand. Prominent among these local assets are the local schools. At the same time, local educators are recognizing that successful schools rest on the rock of economically mobile communities.

This report introduces and explores the idea that schools might become important participants, contributors, and benefactors in a process of community development that values the internal assets of neighborhoods. Case studies of school/community partnerships gathered from around the country reveal some clear lessons about what works and what does not.

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### About the Neighborhood Innovations Network

The Neighborhood Innovations Network (NIN) is a project of Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research. Its mission is to locate, analyse, and promote neighborhood-based projects that build upon and enhance local capacities to address issues and solve problems.

NIN's Principal Investigator, John L. McKnight, also contributed to the conceptualization of this report. Graduate assistant Christine George conducted many of the interviews and NIN Coordinator Xandria Birk and Beatrice Mahlum produced it.

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# COMMUNITY-BASED DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL SCHOOLS: A PROMISING PARTNERSHIP

## Introduction

As the challenges to community-based organizers and developers escalate, so also do the creative new responses which community builders invent. Many of these inventors now recognize that rebuilding low and moderate income communities “from the bottom up” requires the mobilization and participation of all of the “assets” at hand — and that prominent among those assets are the local schools. At the same time, local school leaders are recognizing that successful schools rest on the rock of economically viable communities. This report introduces and explores the idea that schools might become important participants, contributors, and beneficiaries in a process of community development that values the internal assets of neighborhoods.

## The Context: Building on Community Assets

For community-based organizers and developers, the task of obtaining concessions, subsidies, and investments from *outside* the community has become more and more difficult. Both public and private sector actors face resource limitations which curtail their ability to “help,” even when they are persuaded that they should.

As a result, some community development leaders are redoubling their efforts to locate, assess, convene and further develop a wide range of assets from *within* the community. In addition to recognizing that resources from the federal, state and city governments are scarce, and that many private sector actors have abandoned the city, these new internally-focussed

organizers/developers point to two other factors which have led them to focus first on local asset development.

- A neighborhood where internal assets are fully mobilized and linked is a neighborhood which can plan and prioritize, and can mount strong and effective campaigns for what outside resources *are* available.
- A neighborhood where internal strengths have been maximized is a neighborhood which can make *better* use of whatever resources it can attract.

What does it mean for community organizers and developers to put internal "asset development" on their agendas? Most importantly, this shift in strategic emphasis requires a clear shift in *perspective*. We can no longer regard city neighborhoods, even the most devastated, as simply hopeless collections of needs, problems and deficiencies — as places where helpless individuals and hapless organizations predominate. This is, in fact, the prevailing perspective of those who make policy and distribute resources. It is also a perspective which forces community leaders to denigrate their own neighbors and neighborhood in order to attract "help." (What is a "needs survey" if not an invitation to paint the bleakest portrait possible?)

But there *is* an alternative perspective, one which presents a sharp contrast to this needs-centered view. This alternative begins with the simple recognition that, while the problems and needs in many neighborhoods are very real indeed, they describe only a part of the community's reality. The *other* reality is the neighborhood's strengths — its people and what they know and can do, its informal and formal associations, its organizations and businesses, its buildings and its open spaces, its vacant lots and "waste," and *certainly*, its schools. Once we begin to reconsider our neighborhoods as collections of assets, strengths and capabilities, the door is open to the development of an internally

focused, asset driven approach to building strong communities. In fact, the *strong community*, in this view, is one in which strengths and assets have been:

1. discovered, inventoried and made visible;
2. convened for the purposes of planning and strategizing about their own future and about the future of their neighborhood;
3. connected with each other in a newly strengthened web of mutually beneficial relationships; and
4. engaged, as a final step, in attracting and controlling additional outside resources.

Focusing on an asset driven organizing and development strategy should be seen not as a complete and comprehensive approach to rebuilding communities. Rather, it ought to complement and strengthen other important emphases at the local, state and national levels, and among groups which are often less "community based." But it is clear that, as community groups gather experience and accumulate small successes in asset development, they are at the same time building a powerful (and necessary) new political and "public relations" argument: "Look at how much we have accomplished with what we have now," they proclaim, "and imagine what we could build with some additional help."

### The Local School as a Development Asset

Within this internally focused, asset-based development strategy, the potential for creating partnerships between local schools and community development groups seems particularly promising. The school, in fact, is a collection of valuable assets which might be mobilized to assist the development process.

What does a school have to offer as a partner in community building? An initial list might begin with these nine important elements:

- **Facilities**

Schools are places where community groups can meet. They also can serve as places that "incubate" community activities — from small businesses to neighborhood festivals to social service programs.

- **Materials and equipment**

The computer, communication and reproducing equipment in schools can be used in support of, or shared with, community groups. Similarly, the books and library can be used by local people as a resource.

- **Purchasing power**

The materials, commodities, and services purchased by schools can be directed to initiate, support, or expand neighborhood enterprises, including those created by local young people.

- **Employment practices**

As a major employer in most neighborhoods and towns, the school's hiring practices can focus upon local residents.

- **Courses**

Through existing classes or newly created evening courses, schools can provide education and training for residents or groups who seek to participate in the area's development efforts.

- **Teachers**

In every neighborhood the teachers are a concentrated pool of highly trained and specialized adults with critical skills and essential knowledge that they can contribute to the efforts of local groups involved in development activities.

- **Financial capacity**

Schools have the local power to generate and receive special funds through bond issues and proposals to government agencies, corporations and foundations not usually accessible to community groups. This special capacity can be an important resource in a community development strategy.

- **A focus for adult involvement**

The local school is potentially a strong magnet for attracting the interests and commitments of parents and other adults in the community.

- **Young people**

The students with ideas, energy, and idealism can become important actors through classes, projects and internships which involve them in the local community development process. These same young people are also important linkages to the other adult leadership in the community.

Finally, in addition to rediscovering the school as a rich mine of resources, it is important to recognize that the renewed focus on *locality* on the part of both education and economic development leaders forms a promising backdrop to these efforts. School reformers — whether they advocate "choice," or vouchers, or school-based management — are increasingly convinced that while national resources and standards are important, the culture, curriculum and commitments of the local school are crucial to educational success. Similarly, effective community development efforts are those which engage local energies, and which carefully tailor programs and approaches to local conditions.

These lessons are simple: only local groups can catalyse the *commitments* of local people, and only those commitments can insure success in education and development efforts.

## The Partners: Common Interests, Separate Lives

The discovery of the local school as a collection of potential assets can be the beginning of a new development partnership. But a solid and lasting alliance must be based also on the recognition by both school officials and community development leaders that they share important values and interests. Both groups must understand first that healthy communities produce and support educational excellence, and second, that good schools are the best guarantee of a community's future. To our schools we have entrusted the keys to our communities' futures. On the shoulders of our community-based leaders we place the challenge to rebuild today while at the same time establishing for residents a stake in tomorrow.

All too often, the present-oriented community builders and the school-based trustees of the future operate independently, on completely separate tracks, in totally divorced worlds. The good work of community-based developers proceeds without involvement by young people or the schools. And the schools do not think very creatively about how they might connect young people to the future in concrete ways.

Instead, school leaders repeatedly call upon the local community leadership to join the schools in solving their fiscal and legislative crises. Many school people call this effort a "school-community partnership." Unfortunately, throughout the United States there are signs that the "partnership" is weakening. One of the reasons is that often it is not a partnership at all.

In fact, as schools have become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, public and private schools in many rural and urban communities have lost their

power as valuable community resources. And many economically distressed towns, communities, and neighborhoods have begun to struggle toward economic revitalization without the valuable contributions of the local schools. It is interesting to note that concern about the schools' isolation is a major topic among human service providers as well.

### Genuine Partnerships, Concrete Relationships

Genuine partnerships involve not only an agreement about common interests and commitments, but also a way to express those commitments through concrete activities. In preparing this report we examined a sample of a dozen cases of such concrete cooperation. Each of these cases, as well as another three with which we have been engaged in Chicago, involves a community-based development group or leader with both the schools and the young people in the community. Each expands the experience of young people, and therefore the definition of "education," beyond the classroom and into the community. Each of the projects understands *community development* as its central goal.

Beyond these basic areas of agreement, however, these projects are richly idiosyncratic. Consider only a partial list of the concrete activities in which young people are engaged:

- interviewing community leaders;
- drawing a planning map;
- devising a development strategy;
- "shadowing" executives;
- writing "walking tour" guide books;
- building a Halloween graveyard on a vacant lot;
- beginning union apprenticeships;
- organizing to save a public library;
- making and selling placemats for
- participating in community cooking classes;
- building displays for businesses;
- writing and publishing an ethnic history of the school and neighborhood;
- painting murals in the community;
- rehabbing apartments;
- repairing pipe organs;
- publishing a neighborhood

- restaurants;
- accounting and bookkeeping for a business;
- newspaper;
- mediating racial disputes
- developing an adult literacy program
- processing recyclables.

This list could be expanded extensively. It should be sufficient to indicate the wide range of potential community centered activities in which young people can be productively involved.

All of these concrete activities are embedded in very particular local settings. They involve complex relationships among various organizations and leaders. they were begun as responses to specific interpretations of local problems and opportunities. The ways in which they gather and generate resources, as well as the problems they have encountered, are also varied. Keeping in mind, then, the small sample size and non-systematic evaluation procedures involved, it may nonetheless prove instructive to summarize a few preliminary observations.

**Project Initiator:**

Most of these projects were developed initially by community-based development organizations. Two began with an individual community development consultant, one in a university, and one in a local school.

**Participation:**

All of these projects are characterized by the wide range of participants who play important roles: students, teachers, principals, business leaders, community development leaders, public officials, etc., etc. Though much of the school participation involves high schools, a number of middle schools and even a couple of elementary schools participated.

**Benefits:**

All of the existing projects produce benefits for the three major participants: the community-based development group, the school, and the students.

**Attitude Toward Youth:**

Each of these projects has discovered ways to mobilize young people as active contributors to the community. Students are regarded as assets, and are treated with respect. In addition, each of these efforts has rebuilt the connections between young people and adults, thus overcoming the marginalization of the youth. These relationships, too, are "two-way," with each contributing and receiving.

**Incentives**

A variety of enticements were found to be effective as guarantors of youth participation. In about half of the projects, some kind of academic credit was granted for the activity (including two instances of college-level credits). Almost all of the rest of the projects offered the young people an hourly wage (from minimum wage up to \$6.50/hour). But most community development leaders stressed the motivational importance of treating youth as contributing members of the community. "Once the kids got going, once they understood that their planning activities would be taken seriously by adults in the community, we couldn't get them away from meetings," reported one leader of a Southeast Minnesota project.

**Results**

Though it is much too early, and our sample is much too small, to warrant systematic evaluation, nonetheless a number of indicative results can be summarized. A few examples:

- Neighborhood Housing Service projects in Denver and elsewhere point to a significant reduction in drop-out rates among "at-risk" youth in the program.
- Student-produced community development plans are being adapted by eleven communities in Southeast Minnesota.
- Organizers of the Steel Valley community and schools train 50 young leaders a year, a process which recently led to a successful campaign to save a local library, a new community history and a business which makes and sells placemats.
- The impressive mix of participants convened by the West Philadelphia Improvement Corporation includes a high school, 2 middle schools and 2 elementary schools, along with a myriad of private and public sector actors. New ventures include two comprehensive community schools, a housing renovation business, a pipe organ repair concern, landscaping teams and muralists.
- The East Bay's Tri-City Economic Development Corporation has employed more than 130 teens over the last five years, while paying young people over \$100,000 in salaries to operate the business.

### School-Based Community Development: A Relational Model

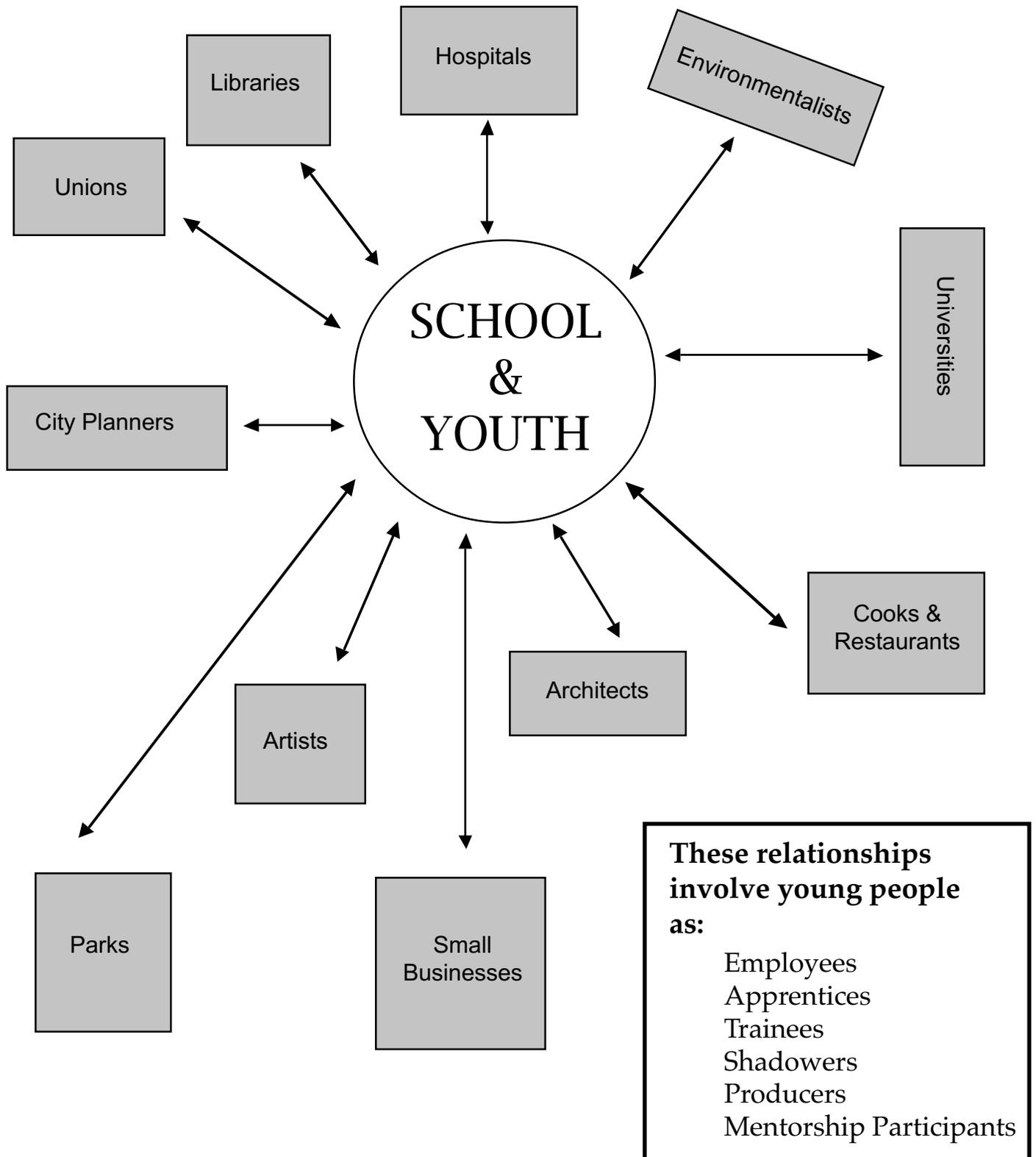
Community-based development leaders who have involved themselves in these activities stress one theme above all others: this work, they report, is most importantly about building, strengthening and sustaining *relationships*. The successful, community developer discovers local assets, develops his or her own relationships with the leaders of those groups, and begins to facilitate connections with other community-based actors and organizations.

Thus most of the development leaders indicated that the prerequisite for developing a successful project was gaining the trust and respect of the local principals and key teachers. Once this relationship with the school had been built, attention could be shifted to the task of connecting the school and its students on the one hand, to a wide range of community institutions and resources on the other.

The graphic on the next page illustrates the wide range of relationships which were constructed by community-based organizations in even our limited sample. Young people, in this model, are the key points of connection between the schools and the community, and they play a variety of roles as they embody these relationships.

# School-Based Community Development: A Relational Model

Community-based development organizations have built these active relationships:



## Some Notes of Caution

Clearly the promise of building genuine partnerships between, first, community-based development organizations and local schools, and then, between the schools and the rest of the community, has captured the imagination of certain community development and education leaders. But many of these same leaders are quick to offer cautionary advice. Following are six distilled lessons from experienced practitioners:

1. The Community-based Organization "Fit"

Construct this activity so that it fits "naturally" into existing priorities and programs. For example, if job training or business development or housing rehabilitation is at the center for the CBO's activity now, start discussions with school officials around that topic.

2. The Community "Fit"

Construct this activity so that it responds to the community's needs. For instance, four of the projects began partly in response to the community's desire to keep young people from leaving the town or community after high school.

3. The School "Fit", I

Construct the activity with school officials as full participants. Identify already existing relationships and build upon these. In a number of cases, these cautions have meant that project start-up was delayed up to a year while those key relationships were built.

4. The School "Fit", II

As a community-based developer, one needs to "learn the culture of the school," as one leader put it. "Many school professionals are very protective

of their "turf," worried another. The idea here is not to burden teachers, students and school administrators with yet another set of expectations that detract from the school's ability to accomplish its fundamental educational objectives. Rather this approach suggests that linking schools and their communities in direct, dynamic and meaningful revitalization can serve as the foundation for an *educational* revitalization as well. Having a "real world" laboratory and constituency for the work they do could greatly increase the maturation for, and efficiency of, the overall learning process among students and teachers alike.

5. Beginnings

Virtually everyone stressed the need to "start small, don't bite off more than you can chew." Particularly since relationship building is so central to this process — relationships both among community and organizational leaders, as well as those between young people and adults — the admonition toward a very measured and careful, step-by-step project development process makes good sense. "Be prepared," cautioned one director, "To encounter new problems, learn new skills and invent new solutions with every step of this process."

6. The Credibility Risk

A number of community development leaders noted that multiplying relationships carried with it the increased risk of occasional failure, and therefore of a loss of credibility for the organization. In some cases, for example, the young people themselves were identified with the CBO, thus tempting the organization's leaders to involve only the "best and the brightest" in the project.

Despite these very real cautions, however, the overwhelming assessment by local development leaders was very clear indeed. They agreed that:

- Local schools represent a vast reservoir of untapped resources for community building.
- Local school leadership can be “cultivated and converted,” as one leader put it, to a vision and a set of practices which reconnect the school and community.
- Young people are ready and eager to be challenged, and asked to contribute to community development activities.
- Community-based development groups can only be strengthened by the growing number and strength of the relationships they construct during these processes.

### Building on These Beginnings

If the initial reports from community development leaders are to be believed, these partnerships are indeed promising. How might the Council, along with other interested groups, begin to nurture further exploration and experimentation, building on these promising beginnings?

1. Virtually all of the community development leaders with whom we spoke were excited to learn that others had initiated similar partnerships. A number of them suggested that facilitating some contacts among these practitioners might prove helpful and instructive.
2. Further attention might be given as well to the experiences and perspectives of the school-based participants in these projects. How have teachers adjusted? How are curricula affected? What kinds of programs are appropriate for purposes of granting academic credit? Can these programs increase parent and other adult participants in a range of school activities?

Can they help to build political support for education funding? These and other questions focussed on the educator's side of the partnership certainly bear further examination.

3. If and as the number of these projects continues to grow, some attention should be paid to conducting a more thorough and systematic evaluation. Though it is probably too early to commission that work today, it is *not* too soon to begin to think about evaluation criteria. Is it appropriate to expect, for example, a measurable effect on drop-out rates. Rising test scores? What about, from the community development point of view, the creation of jobs? Can various participation rates be accurately measured? Can one capture a "new sense of commitment to the community," as one organizer put it? These questions need not be answered today. Nor need they be the *only* guides to the worthiness of these projects. But at some future date, the Council might consider systematically evaluating these developments.
4. Perhaps it is *not* too early to consider the production of a simple "user-friendly" "Practitioners' Guide to School/Community Development Partnerships." A collection of project ideas, suggestions for getting started, guide to resources, cautions and other advice might find a growing audience. Perhaps NCCED and other national networks might co-sponsor? Distribute? Promote?
5. Finally, the work of community development practitioners who are involving young people *apart from the schools* might be reviewed and connected with the groups doing school-connected work. It would be instructive to compare the two approaches.

Corporate Support for the School/Community  
Development Partnership

In many communities, private institutions including corporations, foundations and religious organizations are already participating with community-based development groups as they forge these new relationships with local schools. The precise ways in which corporate and non-profit sector leaders enter this process vary from one locality to the next. One immediate challenge in some areas may involve convening the supporters of local community development with those who have concentrated on education support. Might the supporters of these local partners — the school and the CBO — forge a partnership themselves?

In addition, it might be helpful to revisit the Committee for Economic Development's 1985 recommendations for business/public school cooperation. They characterize their proposals as "a 'bottom-up' strategy that views the individual school as the place for meaningful improvements in quality and productivity." Though most of their recommendations deal with the school in isolation from the community, some point directly to an expanded role in support of the partnership. For example, CED advocates the facilitation of parental (and other adult) involvement in the schools, as well as the expansion of cooperative education programs (combining classroom learning with part-time work experience).

In addition, our interviews with the 12 project organizers uncovered a range of actual ways in which businesses are supporting the partnership:

- 3 sites involve corporate employees in mentor relationships with students.

- 2 projects incorporate “shadowing” as a way to introduce young people to the world of work.
- Job training and placement is central to a number of projects.
- JTPA, with strong business leadership, provides funding for parts of three projects, while the Private Industry Council supports another.

Furthermore, in many communities, business support for school reform has been an increasingly important factor. The expertise, leadership, material resources, and political clout contributed by the corporate community has opened up new educational agendas and possibilities in many of our largest cities as well as in smaller communities across the country. Finally, widespread concern about the quality of our 21<sup>st</sup> century work force combined with an increased understanding of the accomplishments of community-based development groups should equip the business community to understand and value the partnerships explored in this paper. For if strong linkages are a key to building viable communities, then they are worthy of nurturance and support from all of our major institutions.

## APPENDIX

### Summaries of Community Development — Schools Projects Surveyed

**Bedford County Literacy Council**, Chestnut Ridge, Pa. Contact: Wayne Henderson, Principal (814) 839-4480.

As an outgrowth of a school-based youth community service initiative, young people created this literacy project for adults in this rural economically depressed area. Although adults do most of the tutoring, the young people do all the fund raising, administration, and comprise all the board of directors members.

**Bethel School Improvement Project**, Chicago, Illinois. Contact: Mary Nelson, Executive Director, Bethel New Life (312) 826-5540.

The goal of this project is to blend the development of academic and intellectual performance with the practical lessons of work experience through the establishment of a school-based entrepreneurial enterprise at three high schools, Flower, Orr and Westinghouse, on the West Side of Chicago. This effort is supported by the Center of Law and Education/Vocational Education Project.

**Bright Futures**, Northwestern Pennsylvania, Contact: Carol Hillman, developer and staff person, (814) 226-6236).

This is an example of a school project evolving into a community economic development effort. The project is focused on retaining youth in the community, preventing drop outs, and promoting post secondary education and training. Galvanized by their participation in this project, parents, business people and school staff have organized “Valley Rally,” a mass effort by the community to define needs and develop a plan for economic improvement in this economically depressed former coal mining area. Funding has been received from the Heinz Foundation.

**Economic Development for Youth**, Southeastern Minnesota. Contact: Patricia Abbe, Project Developer, (507) 451-2549.

This project in rural Minnesota involves youth in the economic development of their communities in order to positively impact on the retention of youth in these communities. Students take a specifically designed “economic development” class, devise an economic development plan for their community, and serve on community civic and development committees as full members. This project is funded by Southeastern Minnesota Initiative Fund of the McKnight Foundation.

**Partners-In-Education**, Marshall Heights Community Development Organization, Inc., Washington, D.C. Contact: Lloyd Smith, Executive Director, (202) 396-1200.

This project, with George S. Richardson Elementary School, involves working adults from the community in a mentoring program with 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The project includes day trips, one-to-one involvement and all day seminars. By products of the projects have been two youth clubs, one for girls and one for boys.

**Seward Redesign, Inc.**, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Contact: Richard Polanski, President, (612) 338-8729.

This community-based economic development corporation has a project that focuses on youth employment and skills development. Working with both schools and employers, youth are placed in summer employment that is geared to the vocational future of the young person. Funding is from JTPA, the city of Minneapolis and the employers.

**South Brooklyn Local Development Corporation**, New York. Contact: Bette Stoltz, Executive Director, (718) 852-0328.

This organization works with youth and the schools in a variety of ways, all focusing on the economic health of the community. Projects include shadow mentoring, after school classes, community art displays, beautification efforts, and a summer employment project surveying the industrial base of the community for planning and evaluation. Funding comes from public youth monies through the community board and the school board, as well as JTPA.

**Sommerville Community Development Corp.**, Somerville, MA. Contact: John Taylor, President, (617) 776-5931.

The SCDV has developed and operates a school-based mediation program funded by the Attorney General's Office, Lotus Foundation and in-kind contributions by the school district. Student and teacher mediators are assisted by a staff person from SCDC. The project was originally intended to reduce the number of school suspensions and dropouts. It has expanded to focus on promoting racial harmony and cultural diversity.

**Symposium on the City, the River and Tomorrow**, Steel Valley School District, Pennsylvania. Contact: Jerry Longo, School Superintendent, (412) 464-3650.

This project is focused on building youth leadership and encouraging young people to remain in the area. It evolved from a "RUDAT" analysis of this economically depressed area sponsored by the American Association of Architects. Modeled after Leadership Pittsburgh, youth participate in an orientation to the issues, leaders, and institutions of their community and

design and work on a variety of community development projects, including the renovation of the public library.

**TriCity Economic Development Corporation**, San Francisco Bay Area. Contact: Richard Valle, Executive Director, (415) 471-3850.

TriCity, a not for profit recycling business, is the largest employer of youth in the area, having employed over 130 youth in the past five years in after school, weekend and summer employment. Also TriCity works with the schools on buy back waste projects that both involve youth and also fund school activities. The projects support themselves. Additional funding is needed by TriCity only for capital development.

**Youth Works**, Denver Neighborhood Housing Services, Denver Colorado. Contact: Brian Barhaugh, Youth Project Coordinator, (303) 292-5616.

This project focuses on dropout prevention, school completion and job training. It is part of the larger strategy of DNHS to revitalize Northeast and Northwest Denver communities that are economically depressed and have poor housing stock. With funding from JTPA and cooperation from the city and local high schools, students attend classes in the mornings and work in the afternoons for pay and credit. Through Youth Works they renovate housing and participate in entrepreneurial projects.

**West Philadelphia Improvement Corp.** Contact: Ira Harkavy, University of Pennsylvania, (215) 898-5351.

This project to revitalize the economically depressed area surrounding the University of Pennsylvania involves a coalition including the University, Philadelphia Urban Coalition, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, Philadelphia Building Trades Council, the School District, Philadelphia Labor and Management Committee, the Philadelphia PIC and the U.S. Department of Labor. The various school and youth based projects include landscaping, house rehabilitation, concert pipe organ repair, graffiti and litter removal, litter painting, construction work, and community history projects. Funding is composed of a mix of federal, state and private monies.