

Re-thinking “Community”

By Dick Bernard

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“Community: n [L *communitas*, a community, fellowship, from *communis*, common]. 1. common possession or enjoyment; as a community of goods...2. a society of people having common rights and privileges or common interests, civil, political, etc., or living under the same laws and regulations; as, a community of farmers. 3. society at large: the public, or people in general: in this sense used with the definite article; as, burdens laid upon the poorer classes of the community. 4. common character; similarity; likeness; as, community of spirit...5. Commonness; frequency [Obs] 6. the people living in the same district, city, etc. under the same laws. 7. the district, city, etc. where they live....”

Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary

When you say ‘community’ in the context of public schools, who do you include?

In the public school context, within whose ‘walls’ I ‘lived’ as a teacher or association staff person for 36 years, the word ‘community’ seems on reflection, to have had a limiting definition: ‘Community’ was children and their parents; and, only on an ad hoc or as needed basis, certain power subgroups within the community, as the ‘business community,’ the ministerial association, civic organizations, or volunteers in the schools were included in the definition. The entire body politic seemed included only immediately prior to an important school election.

Rarely in my career did I hear ‘community’ defined in a broader, all-inclusive way, as per Webster’s definition (above). The informal and limited public school definition of ‘community’ was the definition I internalized until I retired in 2000, even though I worked with NEA’s Family-School-Community Partnership and Public Engagement programs. It was only following retirement that I personally experienced the negative implications of this limited definition for public schools: the feeling of being an ‘outsider.’

A narrow definition of ‘community’ is a serious problem for public education.

The problem is easily remedied: simply identify who the total ‘community’ really is, and take simple and inexpensive steps to begin enrolling everyone, one citizen at a time.

It is often estimated that three-fourths, or even more, of tax-paying citizens have no direct day-to-day relationship with the local public schools (except, of course, for paying the taxes to make the schools possible).

The 2000 U.S. Census revealed that 63% of the households in the United States had no one under the age of 18 living in them. The probability is that the next census will reveal that this percentage is even higher. This population, which I’ve come to define as “Outside the Walls” of public education, is a population ignored or minimized at great peril. These are the people who pass (or reject) school funding referendums; and elect all public officials, for good or ill of public schools.

Who are these people ‘outside the walls?’

There are many definitions, but a starting set of ‘outsiders’ might be subdivided as follows:

- ‘Empty-nesters’: parents and grandparents whose kids went through public schools, but are long since graduated.

- Citizens who have never had children of their own (but likely are aunts, employers, mentors, etc.)
- Citizens who have children of pre-school age
- Citizens who have chosen non-public or home-school or similar options for their children
- Citizens who have only very recently arrived in a community, and have not yet set roots within it.

Each of these groups have significantly different beginning perceptions about, and needs from, public school, and cannot be treated with 'one size fits all' public relations.

It cannot be assumed that the usual forms of school to community communications are relevant to these subgroups. Like the subset 'parents,' citizens within these groups are not cookie cutter models of each other, but accurate generalizations can be made to maximize positive outreach to them.

The task of the public school is to invest the time and energy necessary to get to know who these groups are, and to begin and continue the process of constructive outreach to them, and full inclusion of them, rather than simply engaging them only at a time of need, like passage of a financial referendum.

Simply recognizing their existence is a major first step. Consciously involving them in the ongoing conversation about public school is a great second step. The songwriters Edith Lindeman and Carl Stutz caught the necessary mood very well in their 1954 hit song, "Little Things Mean a Lot." Build a program based on "Little Things" and the big things will follow.

"Rome wasn't built in a day" goes the old saying, but with adequate time and effort, Rome was, indeed, built.

Best wishes for success.