Why is Education Essential to a Sustainable Community?

Our country’s founders recognized at the time of the American Revolution that public education was fundamental to a democratic society. Education has profound implications for any community’s sustainability.

Public schools are our nation’s greatest asset. They are instruments of social justice. They enable literacy; they provide the only grounding many citizens ever get in science, social studies and other bodies of knowledge essential to civic discourse. They are crucial to making the informed decisions a democracy requires and to living in a complex society.

The impact of public schools at the community level is visible and profound. Companies locate factories and offices in part based on the caliber of a region’s workforce and the public schools available to serve their employees’ children. Most families relocating choose communities primarily because of their school systems. Public education also represents the best opportunity people living in poverty have for brighter futures and better paying jobs.

Resources for Communities

A+ Schools  
http://www.aplusschools.org/  
412/258-2660

Consortium for Public Education  
http://www.theconsortiumforpubliceducation.org/index.htm  
412/678-9215

Head Start  
215/861-4070

PA Association for the Education of Young Children  
www.pennaeyc.org  
717/213-0581

PA Department of Education  
www.pde.state.pa.us  
717/783-6788

Wireless Neighborhoods  
www.wireless-neighborhoods.org  
412/363-1914

Photo: Jason Cohn
Education

Actions for Implementation

In this region and many others across the country, public schools drive property values and property values, in turn, determine the wealth of public schools. For affluent communities, it is a virtuous cycle. For poor communities, it is a vicious one. To level the playing field, Pennsylvania has been experimenting with adjustments to state funding based on a so-called “foundation budget”.

The process of “foundation budgeting” focuses on the right questions about education in sustainable communities:

- Whether school funding is adequate
- Whether distribution of funding is equitable
- Whether districts are held accountable.

Under the philosophy of foundation funding, the determination of adequacy has everything to do with how much it costs to deliver a quality education to every child.

At the moment, the thrust is to ensure equitable distribution of resources by augmenting the funding of districts whose own tax efforts can’t meet the standard of adequate funding. Adequacy for all doesn’t necessarily mean equality of funding. We must recognize that the children of our poorest communities often need greater resources than those in our wealthiest. All too often, we get this backwards. Sustainability as a region depends on getting it right.

Accountability in an era of global competition requires that we look to world standards. The latest comparisons are not encouraging. On average, the latest International Student Assessment showed 15-year olds in the U.S. to be trailing peers in science in 16 of the 30 countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. U.S. students trailed peers in 23 countries in math.

The nature of public education in our country—with systems built on local control—necessitates community solutions.

Assuming adequate funding, some of the characteristics of public education to be encouraged in the most sustainable communities would contribute to its economic viability as well as to civic vitality. Among them:

- Collaborative leadership; school systems that avail themselves of thinking from diverse groups of employees—at all levels—as well as from students and other community stakeholders are more likely to find the most responsive and cost-effective solutions to problems.
- Cooperative use of resources; school systems can go a long way toward engaging communities by inviting citizens in and by reaching out to them. Resource sharing is just one of the ties that can bind. Districts in sustainable communities not only would make their own facilities available to residents, but, when possible, use, rather than duplicate facilities already established by other community institutions or municipalities.
- Curriculum that is rich and varied; all students should try their hands at music and art. Abilities in woodworking, mechanical and or technical pursuits should be valued as much as academic gifts. The capacity for districts to offer diversity of learning experiences again presents opportunities for partnerships and resource sharing with community organizations, from local chamber orchestras to craftsman’s guilds.
- Professional development; ongoing education for teachers is essential to helping them to keep pace with the learning needs, technological and societal changes their students face in the 21st century.
- Collaboration among districts. Often districts struggle with problems that others around them already have solved. Multi-district in-service experiences, such as The Consortium for Public Education’s Journey to Learn, offer opportunities to increase collaboration among districts.
- Neighborhood schools. Although impractical in some communities and in some situations, schools should be located within walking distance of as many students as possible. Proximity of schools contributes to physical health and reduces the need for fossil-fuel dependent transportation and its associated costs.
- Adding ‘real world’ experience to classroom learning. Research tells us that career exploration and exposure to the workplace deepen students’ academic engagement, which, of course contributes to a better-trained workforce.
- Create a ‘pride of place’ among young people; in addition to giving students ‘real world’ exposure to their workplaces, sustainable communities also give kids opportunities to experience government and civic responsibilities first hand. Examples include a student seat on the town governing body and internships.
- Wireless neighborhoods; the tools for learning have been dramatically expanded with the advent of the internet; Sustainable schools and communities will ensure all children’s access with community wireless networks.

In short, the most sustainable schools and communities operate on the principles of interdependency. Schools do not alone sustain education, but education does sustain community. Just as the most sustainable schools will be those woven into the fabric of their communities, the most sustainable communities will be those whose cultures prize literacy and learning of all kinds.
Creating Career Pathways and Civic Engagement Opportunities for Youth

It’s a simple idea, but engaging children early in community—particularly at the powerful moment in their lives when youthful idealism fuses with passion for vocation—should be a key component of any sophisticated sustainability strategy. Youth development is workforce development. Civic leadership stems from civic engagement.

Through a program called The Future Is Mine (TFIM), The Consortium for Public Education finds time and again that kids respond with creativity given opportunities for ‘hands on’ learning; they bring curiosity given occasions to explore careers from inside the workplace; and they bring insight and energy to opportunities for civic involvement.

Launched nine years ago, TFIM creates these opportunities in school districts throughout Western Pennsylvania. Working with faculty advisors in 24 districts, the program supports high school students, beginning in ninth grade, in identifying and exploring career interests through annual individual projects; it also supports them in peer and community outreach through two team projects each year that make career exploration either a focus or natural by-product. Among other examples:

- The entire TFIM team at McKeesport High School this year mounted a local environmental project whose ripple effects spread half a world away. Inspired by the work of Vietnam veteran Paul Pinkerton, they launched a community-wide electronics recycling campaign whose proceeds they donated toward scholarships for “Paul’s Kids,” the nonprofit he founded to aid southeast Asian orphans. The experience took them inside companies, community groups and churches where they not only made presentations to spark small recycling drives, but gained exposure to adults in different careers as well as experience—in organization, presentation and communication—that any employer would value;

- At Pittsburgh Brashear High School, which participated for the first time this year in the program, TFIM team members individually researched careers and created presentations about them for peers. They also launched an awareness campaign about The Pittsburgh Promise, developing a brochure to explain terms of the scholarship program to peers and a film for middle school students;

- A few years ago, students at McKeensport High School took on a project for Kennametal that saved the Latrobe-based company tens of thousands of dollars a year. A maker of metalworking tools, Kennametal had no system for ensuring that the high-cost precision grinding wheels used on its shop floor were returned after use to the right place, or that they underwent routine maintenance. The students developed a simple bar-coding system as well as a scheme for hanging the wheels rather than boxing them. The company adopted the system and executives came from the company’s offices in England to thank them.

To cap these experiences, expand students’ exposure to regional employers, give them further opportunities for leadership, stimulate networking among peers from other districts and provide career-related workshops, the Consortium also engages TFIM teams throughout the region in planning and participating in an annual Student Leadership Conference. The 2009 event included site visits at 16 different workplaces, where groups of students again received ‘hands on’ career exploration opportunities. Among other examples:

- A group visiting Urban Design Associates helped create a new master plan for the town of Braddock. All students participated in the kind of community discussion that precedes many such redevelopment initiatives. Based on those discussions and depending on their interests, the students variously helped create a scale model of the plan; generate graphic renderings of the redesign and develop promotional materials to communicate and ‘test market’ the vision;

- At West-Penn Allegheny Health System, yet another group of students observed open-heart surgery.

- The Consortium routinely seeks students’ feedback on their experience with TFIM and solicits suggestions for improving the program. A few data points from a large survey signal a strong endorsement:

- Some 82 percent found TFIM very or somewhat instrumental in helping them identify careers that matched their interests and abilities, with more than a third describing the program as very instrumental;

- Nearly 91 percent found the program very or somewhat instrumental in helping them understand job expectations such as thoroughness, being on time and dressing appropriately. More than half said TFIM was very instrumental;

- Almost 88 percent said TFIM had been instrumental in getting them more involved in their schools and communities, with more than 45 percent describing the program as very instrumental.

Among TFIM advisors:

- Nearly 89 percent found TFIM very or somewhat instrumental in connecting students with people in fields that interest them, with nearly 40 percent describing the program as very instrumental;

- Nearly 93 percent found TFIM very or somewhat instrumental in helping students make the connection between classroom learning and the world of work, with almost half rating the program very instrumental;
• Fully 96 percent rated TFIM of superior or comparable value to other co-curricular activities offered in their schools, with nearly 78 percent describing TFIM as being of superior value; no respondents found TFIM of lesser value.

The findings are consistent with education research that shows project-based learning helps students develop problem-solving and other higher level thinking skills and that career exploration helps deepen academic engagement.

Communities that truly value children and young adults help them foster identity, purpose and a sense of place. Young people are more inclined to stay in communities that help them find their voices, listen when they speak and be part of the action. By continually seeking student input to shape the experiences offered through TFIM, The Consortium lives its conviction that students can play a role in shaping education. They aren’t mere passengers; they help drive the program. Given the chance, they can help drive community development too. Ultimately, the most sustainable communities will be ones that occasionally give kids the keys to the car.

Case courtesy of the Consortium for Public Education

Photo: Jason Cohn

Resource sheet produced by:

The Consortium for Public Education