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## **Activating Social Capital through Community Support and Interagency Cooperation: A Future Search Success Story in Education**

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

This is the story of how a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens started an effort that changed their community. Their work mobilized citizens in North Platte, NE, a middle American city of 24,000, to provide better educational and support services for children, youth, and their families. Their endeavor emphasized and formalized the importance of social capital in the North Platte community. For its vision and work, the city has since received more than \$1.5 million in grants and national recognition, including the 1998–1999 Award for Excellence in Community Collaboration for Children and Youth, sponsored by the National League of Cities and five other national organizations representing school systems and local governments.

### **FUTURE SEARCH AS A CATALYST OF SOCIAL CAPITAL**

There is a good deal of debate about the exact definition of *social capital*. For our purposes, we agree with Ian Falk (2003) that social capital holds the promise of being a framework that can show us why and how common values, networks, and trust can help provide individuals, families, and communities, in partnership with governments, with the ability to change and improve their social and economic well-being. Future search can produce these same results, prompting the increase of social capital by bringing the system together to discover its common values and agree on, desired actions.

### **BACKGROUND**

In 1996 and 1997, Nebraska Lt. Governor Kim Robak led a major overhaul of the state health and human services agencies to develop a statewide system of care for Nebraska's most vulnerable families, children, and citizens. Not a believer in incremental change, Lt. Governor Robak set forth a rapid, radical format of planning and local implementation to occur within one year.

The pace of this state reform required fast community response. The state created local grants to promote collaborative planning. It granted funds to integrated services that produced systemic results for people rather than to departmentalized services that produced isolated process data like number of clients served or financial statements.

The North Platte region's many collaborative efforts fit into the state's integrated system of care. Future search appeared to be an excellent approach to addressing the urgency for local integrated planning when Lincoln County/North Platte decided to be a lead community in the new Nebraska

Partnership Project.

### **THE STORY BEGINS WITH A FEW PROFESSIONALS**

The path to this success began in the 1980s when regional Director of Special Education and Assistant Administrator Marge Beatty, Region II Human Services Program Director Kathy Seacrest, and Jan Spalding from the Department of Social Services began to work together to look at professional services for families and children in their community. These leaders knew that different community agencies worked with the same families and children but had little interagency communication. Professionals from these agencies were unaware of what the other agencies were doing. They frequently received partial or disjointed information from their mutual clients. No one ever saw the whole picture. Beatty, Seacrest, and Spalding realized that everyone involved was missing a chance to maximize their efforts.

The three invited other service providers to join them in exploring the services and activities of each agency. These early information-sharing gatherings grew to include representatives from the school district, human services, the health department, the mental health department, law enforcement, the juvenile justice system, recreational organizations, and others. All of the participants soon realized that by working as a network and opening communication, they could better coordinate and address the needs of children and families. Through coordination they were able to overcome many of the disadvantages of a compartmentalized service delivery system. Eventually, this growing group formed an organization, Connections, “to coordinate and enhance services for children, youth and families in Lincoln County,” where North Platte is located.

Connections grew to 120 individual members and met quarterly as a whole group. In addition, its five teams—treatment, intervention, coordinating, prevention and education, and special projects—worked individually in their own areas. The prevention and education group worked on critical issues facing students and their families. They knew that there were many latchkey kids in empty homes after school until their parents returned from their workdays. They were aware that working parents had difficulty finding and paying for quality after-school care for their children. This group also knew that the high school was over 50 years old and inadequate. A bond issue for a new high school had been defeated twice in the 1990s. They wanted to find a way to meet more of students’ needs within their limited budgets.

### **PLANNING THE FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE**

Every year, Connections held a professionally facilitated strategic planning day at which they reviewed the past year and set their goals for the upcoming one. In 1997, Connections’ coordinating team was looking for a process for its annual strategic planning session to stimulate new energy, bring in more community members and organizations, and meet the new Nebraska funding guidelines that stressed coordination among agencies. Ken Seeley, executive director of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, was working with Connections to help them develop a local collaborative action plan to address the new state agencies’ funding requirements. His thoughtful description of future search principles, its process, and his experiences in facilitating future searches in other educational

settings convinced the team that future search was worth exploring.

The coordinating team became a steering group. After careful consideration the steering group agreed that a future search would provide a solid foundation for their work. The steering group struggled to create a theme that would capture their dreams and desires for their community. They finally agreed that the theme of their future search would be “The Coming Together Conference: Action Planning for Assuring the Continued Quality of Life in Lincoln County.” Maintaining and growing social capital was the underlying theme of the future search, although the term *social capital* was not widely used at the time.

This community had a long history with social capital. From its pioneer heritage when helping neighbors was a necessity of survival to the present day when neighbors still looked out for each other, a norm of social connections and interactions existed. People pitched in to help when needed, knowing that when they needed help, someone would provide it. As Putnam (2000) has found, “Social capital, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity” (p. 21) are strong in Nebraska. “Statistically, the correlation between high social capital and positive child development (and therefore school success) is as close to perfect as social scientists ever find in data analysis of this sort. States such as . . . Nebraska . . . have healthy civic adults and healthy well-adjusted kids” (p. 297). Connections wanted to stimulate even more social capital on a large scale for the benefit of the entire community.

The future search conference would look at and plan for the future of the entire community, not only for the school system. It would look at how to enrich all aspects of the community: health and mental health, economic development, community pride, recreation, transportation, as well as education. The steering group brainstormed all of the stakeholders who needed to be involved and clustered them into eight stakeholder groups: education, health, agriculture, business and industry, human services, community volunteers, criminal justice, and youth. Because all of Lincoln County had to be represented, participants were of diverse age, gender, occupation, culture, economics, and interests. They included youth, seniors, movers and shakers, old-timers and newcomers, the faith community, and other citizens.

### **THE FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE**

The future search conference was exciting and exhausting. Participants worked hard to listen to and learn from each other. Their time lines graphically illustrated the connectedness in the community. “The future search brought old-timers, newcomers, and everyone in between to a greater understanding of their community. With the time lines and the mind map everyone in the room was on the same page,” a participant said as she recalled the event five years later. The mind map of the present emphasized the current challenges of the many community needs that were not being addressed. The vivid future scenarios were fun and motivating. They left participants dissatisfied with their current reality.

At the conclusion of the future search conference, participants were excited. They realized that, together, they could accomplish the goals they had individually dreamed about. People discovered that others shared many of their ideas. The right people were in the room—a cross-section of citizens was dedicated to make positive changes. School Superintendent Dr. James Merritt and Mayor Jim Whitaker were both ready to tackle

difficult issues. A willingness to implement new ideas and a commitment to change were palpable. Before people left, they volunteered to work on the following teams:

- Schools as centers.
- Youth and recreation.
- A treatment team to coordinate child abuse treatment and investigation teams.
- Integrated services to develop a mechanism for information gathering, and to coordinate, integrate, and expedite service delivery.
- An expanded tax base to bring in industry and commercial enterprises.
- Unified pride to engage the community and the Union Pacific Railroad, a major employer in the community.
- A coordinating team to locate funding, create an organization, and effectively manage Connections.

This was the first meeting where lots of different community groups and people came together. It put people together in the same room, spinning dreams and celebrating history together.

—future search participant

### **FUTURE SEARCH OUTCOMES**

Volunteers and professionals are still working on these teams, although some team names and goals have changed. All teams have enjoyed considerable success. For example, the tax base has expanded considerably with the establishment of a Wal-Mart distribution center in town. During the future search conference, one of the early critics of the process was the director of economic development. By the last day he was won over, stating that he would build the economic development effort on the future search outcomes.

The Connections coordinating team's early effort was to apply for and receive a \$100,000 grant from the Nebraska Foundation for Families and Children. They also changed their name to Community Connections. "After visualizing the future, we were no longer content with the present because we knew that the service could be better for kids and families," recalled the director of special education. "It was obvious that to create a better future we needed dedicated staff."

Community Connections hired a full-time executive director, Jayna Schaaf Swanson, to coordinate and support the work of the teams and to help find ways to turn their visions into reality. Today, Community Connections has three full-time members and one part-time staff member and 25 after-school staff members. This umbrella organization facilitates communication, cooperation, and coordination among more than 70 participating organizations and numerous at-large members. Community Connections, according to its brochure, is "dedicated to planning and implementing action that furthers the quality of life for children and families in Lincoln County." More than 260 Lincoln County residents volunteer their time and talents to accomplish team, committee, and program goals. Annually, approximately 615 families receive direct assistance and positive opportunities through Community Connections.

### **YOUTH**

Youth played a very important role in the future search. This group of articulate and passionate young people made their voices heard in every future search activity. They let the adults know that their needs and goals were critical to the quality of life in the community and that they were an untapped resource. This group took on the task of publicizing activities for youth and working to provide more positive outlets for young people. Their contributions in the future search encouraged the superintendent to add one non-voting youth to the school board.

## **EDUCATION**

Dr. James Merritt, North Platte's new superintendent of schools, had only been in his position a few months before the Coming Together Conference. He was able to acquire an invaluable understanding of the history, challenges, opportunities, and people in his school district in the two and a half days of the future search conference. He was also able to capture the enthusiasm of the future search to create a "schools-as-centers" program in his school system. This new school model would address the problems of fragmented child services while helping all children succeed in school. Schools would combine a range of educational, health, and social services to ensure that children would be ready and able—socially, physically, and emotionally—to learn. Welch (2001) describes the schools-as-centers model as "a proactive response to our new understanding about what all children need. We can no longer separate the child at school from the child after school and from the child at home. The wellbeing of the whole child is tied to the wellbeing of the whole community."

Dr. Merritt's vision, shared with many others at the future search conference, was to connect the community with the schools and to supplement traditional curriculum with new programs to enrich student experiences. His hope was that this enrichment would not come solely from the school district budget.

The schools-as-centers program has grown to sponsor after-school programs at elementary schools, Asset programs (see description below), mentoring and tutoring at the middle schools, and tobacco prevention programs at the high school. "Schools as Centers came from a dream, from a skit at the future search. And now it's fabulous," exclaimed Lois Books, community activist and future search participant.

### **Schools as Centers**

Schools as centers, or community schools, are a concept that is becoming widely accepted around the country. This notion of public school as something more than an academic institution has been advanced by many researchers, including Reginald Clark, Joy Dryfoos, Margot Welch (2000, 14–17), and the late John Gardner. As stated in a position paper by the Public Education Network (2002), the key principles of schools as centers include the following:

- Public schools that offer access to a wide range of programs and supports are better able to fulfill their core academic mandate of student achievement. Faculty members can concentrate on teaching and learning when they have community partners to help children and their families overcome the many nonacademic barriers to learning.

- Public schools need to be part of communitywide coalitions that seek strong connections among community members, service and program providers, and community organizations to address academic and nonacademic barriers to student success. With public schools at the center of a coordinated effort to help children and youth become academically and socially successful, the fabric of community life is strengthened.
- A broad range of community stakeholders must be involved in assessing student and community needs and in determining how those needs should be addressed. The community has a rightful role in shaping schools as centers of community life; organizations and individuals—including nontraditional, often marginalized voices—must be engaged in communitywide strategic planning efforts to determine what programs and supports should be available at school, for whom, and how they should be delivered.

The North Platte program incorporates these principles and goals in its many programs and in its relationship with the community. The Community Connections board of directors and the board of education signed a memorandum of understanding to ensure that the program would run smoothly. It defines and clarifies roles and responsibilities of the involved agencies. Today, students' needs are met by school staff and supported by community volunteers, human service agency staff, and Community Connections staff. Many new programs and services are available at schools through the schools-as-centers programs:

*K.I.D.S. (Kids Involved in Dynamic Stuff) Klub*

This is an after-school program for elementary school children developed through the cooperative efforts of Community Connections and North Platte Public Schools, and initially funded by a grant from the Peter Kiewit Foundation. It provides a convenient and safe location for parents to leave their children, knowing they will be comfortable, well supervised, involved in fun activities, and expanding their learning beyond the classroom. The goal of the program is to establish an environment that creates a bridge between school and home. It offers experiences that not only enrich children but also reinforce basic skills. K.I.D.S. Klub provides a safe and relaxed environment for elementary school children before school and after school until 5:30 P.M. According to its administrator, Michael Davis, K.I.D.S. Klub has eliminated the latchkey problem that the Connections' prevention and education team had originally identified as a precipitating problem.

When President Bush announced the 21st Century Community Learning Center program under his No Child Left Behind Act, North Platte was in a position to receive monies. It already had all the necessary components—protocol, multiagency and community partnerships, and staff. Its K.I.D.S. Klub had a proven track record of meeting the goals of the president's new program. Community Connections used its successful grant-writing approach to obtain the 21st Century Community Learning Center \$1.2 million grant to expand before-school, after-school, and summer-school programs. Buckland Consultants, a local firm, worked with Community Connections and 25 partner agencies to properly complete and submit the applications.

### *The Youth Asset Building Program*

This program was introduced two years after the future search. The coordinating team brought representatives from the Search Institute to introduce its Forty Developmental Assets program to the community.

The forty developmental assets are concrete, common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people. These assets have the power during critical adolescent years to influence choices young people make and help them become caring, responsible adults. (Search Institute [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org))

The Assets program, coordinated by Diann Weiss-Vargas, is now incorporated into the middle schools. Student asset teams at both middle schools promote the 40 developmental assets through school and community activities, which they initiate, organize, and supervise. These teams have sponsored family nights, talent shows, parties, and a booth at the Kid's Safety Saturday.

### *The Lincoln County Tobacco Coalition Program*

This Coalition protects and improves the health of the public by increasing community support and participation in local tobacco control in schools and the community. Funded by the Nebraska Health and Human Services System's Tobacco Free Nebraska and directed by Matthew Weiss, this program promotes clean indoor air policies as it partners with schools. It provides prevention instruction for middle school students and training for teachers while it works to increase compliance with state and local policies that prohibit tobacco sales to minors. For example, students helped with restaurant surveys to determine tobacco use policy. They honored smoke-free restaurants and encouraged others to improve their policies. They worked with asset team youth at a cleanup day called Tobacco Kick Butts. They provided civic and school presentations on tobacco prevention and even produced public service announcements aired on local radio and TV.

### *High Expectations Mentoring Program*

Mentors spend at least four hours per month working with individual students in grades K–5 to provide them with experiences and opportunities not otherwise available. Youth and mentors also have the opportunity to spend time together at sponsored monthly group activities, such as game night, a magician presentation, and a visit to the North Platte Veterinary Clinic. In 2003, volunteer mentors contributed over 500 hours and worked with 25 youth and their families. Teachers report that these students have improved grades and attitudes. In a survey completed in July 2003, 100 percent of mentees reported an improved attitude toward school in general and better school attendance as a result of their relationship with their mentors.

### *The SWAT (Services With Activities for Teens) Team*

This team evolved from the future search “youth and recreation” team. Youth in grades 6–12 initiate and implement fun, safe activities for themselves

and their peers. Their efforts foster pride in their accomplishments while also producing a lot of fun. Their activities go beyond the typical movies and school activities. Last year over 400 people attended the SWAT-sponsored Battle of the Bands where four bands played original and popular music as they competed for cash prizes.

SWAT has formed a partnership with RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) to provide community service activities. The two groups sponsored the "Fill the Ford" project to collect toiletries and hygiene items for those who could not afford them. A local Ford dealership loaned a Ford pickup truck, which was parked outside of Wal-Mart for shoppers to load with items not covered by food stamps. Together SWAT and RSVP members collected \$800 worth of items.

The SWAT team is an example of how the younger generation is learning to build social capital. They are contributing their ideas and energy to the community while having fun. "I just want to be involved, to help people, to be looked at as a leader," said high school student Amy Neal, cochair of SWAT. "I like to have a lot of fun without getting into trouble."

### **Beyond Schools as Centers**

The partnerships between the community and the schools have produced many benefits to the schools and community. The atmosphere in the community reflects its increased pride and ownership, with community members and organizations trusting school leadership and feeling pleased to be connected to the schools.

The future search was a catalyst for Dr. Merritt and others to access and extend social capital in the community. They wisely took advantage of heightened community interest to develop support to further meet educational needs. Examples of this are the bond issue, volunteers, and interagency support.

#### *Bond Issue*

Shortly before Dr. Merritt became superintendent, the voters had defeated three bond issues for construction of a new high school. Despite this record, Dr. Merritt decided to try again to enlist the support of the community to replace or remodel the 1930s-era high school. This time he would bring the community into the process from the very beginning.

Dr. Merritt asked a group of 60 people, including both supporters and opponents, to tell him what needed to be done about the high school. This group led an 18-month effort to determine the best solution. In a very open process, citizens had an opportunity to ask questions, give opinions, and learn about options. After working with other citizens and learning about finances, remodeling, repairing, mechanical components, and facility and construction issues, the original group of 60 developed a list of 22 criteria that needed to be met for them to approve any plan. Their architect provided them with cost estimates for each of nine proposals that met their given criteria. With 85 percent agreement, the group supported one plan for a new high school.

After the group agreed on the plan, they and others went to the community to ask for its approval. More than 1,000 people in a town of 24,000 were involved in this major effort. On April 4, 2000, the town voted. The \$29 million bond issue passed with a 54 percent approval, carrying every

precinct. After the bond issue had passed, town citizens publicly demonstrated their pride and support by purchasing 800 signature bricks for \$100 or \$500. The passage of the bond issue signaled a positive change in the community to a “can do” ethic. In August 2003 the town celebrated the dedication and opening of their new high school. It had been a long time coming; collective pride in this effort was very justified and visible.

#### *Volunteers*

School personnel know that they can call upon community volunteers to provide services to help students. They are using volunteers to combat tardiness and absenteeism problems at the middle schools. Although school staff were able to call students’ homes when they were late for school, they often discovered that the parents were at work and the students had no way of getting to school. The school enlisted the help of parents who were willing, on very short notice, to pick up students and bring them to school. Once the students were in school, they were able to learn in the classroom and also discuss their tardiness problems with school staff.

#### *Interagency Collaboration*

The community has become a true partner with the schools. More agencies, departments, and organizations are now offering their unique contributions in the schools to students and staff. They supplement the curriculum with invaluable resources, information, and role models. Following is a partial list of the programs that community agencies and citizens provide in the schools:

- Probation and police officers work as adjuncts to the educational teams.
- Fire officials work in schools to educate students and teachers about prevention.
- Staff from human and health services provide educational programs to students.
- The Rape and Domestic Abuse Team provides anger management sessions, healthy relationship sessions, and dining manners instruction for students.
- Community Connections and North Platte Community College provides adult basic education for non-English-speaking parents and English as a Second Language instruction for their children as a family in an evening after-school program.
- University of Nebraska extension educators provide units of instruction on better nutrition and healthy snacks. These educators teach Character Counts, a character-building program to elementary and middle school students and K.I.D.S. Klub. Through community donations the extension educators raised money to construct brick murals representing the six pillars of character on a wall of our new high school.

### **CHALLENGES**

Although North Platte has enjoyed major successes, major challenges still remain. Community Connections is trying to find ways to address the continuing needs of students and families. Professionals and volunteers know

that their work will never be over. Sustainability is a key focus. Local financial support must be established so that the program is not totally dependent on grants and awards. The program must leverage its dollars to get the most out of its monies. It must continue to build partnerships and find new community volunteers and resources.

The local school budget has been cut and state aid has been reduced while student and family needs are growing. Now more than ever, this community must work together to maintain its high quality of community and life.

## **REFLECTIONS ON THIS SUCCESS**

Bringing everyone together, strong leadership, and the activation of social capital are three major factors that contributed to the success of this project. "In this small town, we have to support each others' projects, contribute and celebrate together. The future search helped us appreciate this," commented a future search participant. Community Connections has kept everyone together by nourishing the spirit of cooperation and understanding that emerged in the future search. It distributes a regular newsletter with notification of events and actively looks for public relations opportunities. Between 50 and 100 people attend the annual planning day to examine needs and develop solutions. They celebrate their accomplishments, review and renew old goals, and develop new ones.

Leadership in this community has come from many sources. Both the then-new mayor and superintendent utilized the vision, enthusiasm, and public participation from the future search to implement new initiatives. The superintendent set the tone for public involvement and community partnerships. His actions encouraged citizens to become leaders of various committees and projects. The funding and hiring of a dedicated executive director to lead Community Connections was critical in the system changes and in maintaining the momentum established in the future search.

Future search was both a tool and a catalyst for bringing the citizens of North Platte together to appreciate their social capital and to invest it wisely in improving the quality of life in their schools and community. By connecting to shared values and working together to implement specific projects, community members now know that they can make their community better for everyone. They have institutionalized the basics of social capital in their organizations and are educating their youth to build more social capital. These social investors continue their fine work and have a thriving community of which they are very proud.

## **CONCLUSION**

North Platte has "developed innovative, bold and creative collaborations to address the needs of children and youth. . . . They support the high value of local collaborations between and among city governments, county governments, school systems and others in mobilizing neighborhoods and communities to provide services and foster environments supportive of children, youth and families," stated the National League of Cities upon selecting Community Connections as one of seven U.S. communities for its Award for Excellence in Community Collaboration for Children and Youth (Nation's Cities Weekly, 1999). The future search was a significant factor in helping the community earn this award. When it comes to social capital, North Platte is a very wealthy community.

