

Democratic Spaces in Neighborhoods, Schools and Other Settings

Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure *BUILDING BLOCK 1 OF 12 – CREATING SPACES FOR CITIZENS*

Most communities have neighborhood associations, homeowner's associations or neighborhood councils — these are geographically based groups that usually hold monthly face-to-face meetings and are governed by a board or steering committee. Local school councils, parent-teacher associations and other school-based groups are close cousins, with many of the same strengths and limitations. How effective

they are varies wildly from city to city, and from place to place within each city. Many of these groups are run by a small set of active citizens who do not have the time or skills to involve others. While the work on this building block will rarely have to start from scratch, it will require a careful rethinking of the structure, format and role of citizen spaces at the “ground floor” of democracy.



Creating Settings for Neighborhood Action

Louisville, Kentucky (pop. 741,000)

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Four Louisville neighborhoods — California, Phoenix Hill, Shelby Park and Smoketown — have helped to build the Making Connections Network with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The network, which has more than 3,200 members, functions as a learning community of local leaders, residents, faith-based organizations, government, businesses and schools. Members of the network meet monthly in their neighborhoods to develop strategies in the following priority areas: living in strong, connected neighborhoods; doing satisfying work; enjoying and accumulating the money that is earned; and raising children healthy and ready for school. Specialists in each of these areas can be brought in to share their skills and expertise.

The network has achieved results in all four priority areas. For example, more than \$4 million has been generated in neighborhood salaries from job placements through the network, and more than \$2 million in Earned Income Tax Credits was returned to families from free tax preparation services. In collaboration with the city and several local agencies, the network organized Kindergarten Countdown, a program that educates parents and children about the transition to kindergarten. Groups are also working on ways to attract more customers to local farmers markets for healthier food choices.

The project was a finalist in the 2010 Community Matters Competition organized by the Orton Family Foundation, a national organization working on citizen engagement and community development.

PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS:

- Inform and educate citizens.
- Build a stronger sense of community.
- Tap the power of citizens as problem-solvers.
- Develop smarter, more widely supported policies.
- Give marginalized voices a place at the table.

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- Work with and support neighborhood councils and associations to help them become more inclusive, participatory and effective.
- Work with and support school councils and associations to help them become more inclusive, participatory and effective.
- Help other groups — in faith communities, workplaces, clubs and other settings — to become more inclusive, participatory and effective, and connect them with other groups and institutions.
- Connect with neighborhood or local online forums.

WORK BEST WHEN:

- They operate or are linked to a neighborhood online forum.
- They have some sort of staffing (a director paid by the association, a city employee or a highly committed volunteer).
- The director and other leaders have the skills to recruit members, facilitate discussions and design meetings.
- They have some regular, legitimate role in local policymaking (for example, the city council, school board and/or city departments regularly consult with the group on issues related to that neighborhood or school, delegates some decisions to them and/or consults them on city-wide issues).
- They have access to, and support from, middle-level city and school employees, such as police lieutenants, principals and planners.
- There is some process that brings together people from different neighborhood or school groups so that they can compare notes, deal with conflicts and discuss common priorities.
- They provide social and cultural opportunities as well as political ones.
- They provide meaningful roles for young people.
- They engage people in action as well as discussion.