

# What Is a School Community, Anyway?

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I was forewarned by people who know. The idea of the school as a community may sound simple, but it's not. "Community" is an oft-used term, but it is seldom used with precision, its meaning is nebulous, and its connotations are myriad. So I was told, and so I have learned.

To me the word "community" evokes feelings of warmth and joy; it gives rise to thoughts of mutuality, camaraderie, and trust. Speak the word "community" and I see a sunny winter morning, children shoveling snow from the doorsteps of old people who reward them with hot chocolate and adoring pats on the head. But Timothy Bergen, Jr., writes of community as if he has just stubbed his toe on one. In his article in this journal, he wants to unleash teachers on an oppressive and apathetic community that stands in the way of human progress. Maybe my mental images should be reexamined.

To me a school community is an assemblage of the people intimately attached to a school—its teachers, administrators, students, and the students' families. Samuel Peng sees advantages in enlarging this definition, making the school community more of an educational community by drawing the public library into its orbit. Not a bad idea. Frank Belcastro calls upon the PTA to serve as a broker of community-building efforts in the school. Another good idea.

Doug McCullough writes that school communities need strong leadership and broad participation. Paul Baker, Deborah Curtis, and Wayne Benenson see a school community emerging from dyadic partnerships that begin at the center—between principals and teachers—and grow concentrically to include parents and even local business. Janice Rosales discovers sparks of community each time the disparate ethnic groups that comprise her school find cause for agreement, even if the agreement is to celebrate their differences. Karen Brown and Nancy Feyl Chavkin link families and schools with businesses and social agencies to create support networks that help kids; that sounds like community to me.

Various perspectives of community and, particularly, school community appear in this issue of this journal. Clearly, we need some working

definitions. First, let's consider that we are dealing with three constructs: a) the school as a community, b) the school in the community, and c) the school and the community.

When Janice Rosales, the principal of Peirce school in Chicago, writes about uniting the ethnically and linguistically diverse families in her school, she is writing about the school as a community. The school, itself, is a community of its members—teachers, administrators, staff, students, and families of students. Doug McCullough has the same idea in mind when he describes a process by which the principal exerts strong leadership while also encouraging broad participation of teachers and parents. Frank Belcastro writes of the internal workings of a school community, calling on the PTA (or similarly constructed organization) to take the lead in building the community of the school. In these articles, the authors see the school as a community unto itself.

Paul Baker, Deborah Curtis, and Wayne Benenson view the school within the context of a wider community. They first encourage collaboration among the professional employees of the school—principals and teachers. But they also suggest that this collaboration can reach to the outside, to the community-at-large, to include parents and local businesses.

Karen Brown and Nancy Feyl Chavkin view the school in much the same way, but more emphatically urge links to the community-at-large for the benefit of children. Samuel Peng sees the school and the public library as two separate institutions within a larger community and wants to bridge the gap between them.

Timothy Bergen, Jr., writes of the school and the community as separate entities. His is an ivory tower notion of the school, but he challenges teachers to come down from the tower and clean up the mess in the streets below. This view of the school as the meliorating institution in a backward society runs deep in American history. When children were more valuable to their parents as farmhands than as students, the schools worked against the immediate economic interests of the families they served. Teachers were forced to convince families that education was important, or failing to persuade, they were obliged to rescue children from the stifling attitudes of their milieu. In some places and by some people, schools are viewed in the same way today. But in other places, the education level of teachers is not above that of a major portion of community members, and the teachers' value of education is not unique.

If used synonymously with "group," "community" is an amorphous term. An individual is a member of many groups, thus a part of many communities. A school is a community. A neighborhood is a community. A city is a community. A profession is a community. A church is a community. And so, the school is a) a community, b) an entity within larger sets of communities, and c) inclusive of smaller communities within itself. Meaning too much, community means very little.

I will repeat here the idea of the school community that appears elsewhere in this journal and defines the journal's intent:

The school is often discussed in terms of its relationship to the community, suggesting that the school is something apart from community. In fact, the school exists within a mosaic of overlapping communities and is, itself, capable of functioning as a community. A community is a group of people associated with one another who share common values. Geography does not make community, nor does membership nor casual affiliation. When the school functions as a community rather than in a community, its constituents (students, parents, teachers, staff) associate with one another and share common values about the education of children. At the root, members of the school community assume responsibility for one another. Those children become our children, and parents are not external agents but full partners in the education of their children and of each other's children. Teachers are not isolated practitioners of pedagogy, but professionals integrated into the web of community and buoyed by common purpose.

Association of members and common values are the defining criteria of community, and they are the instruments of community-builders. Beginning with the dyadic partnerships of Baker, Curtis, and Benenson, members of a school community strengthen their association with one another. With the insights of Rosales, McCullough, and Belcastro, whole chunks of the school community's constituents are unified and their educational values are illuminated. Then the community can be broadened, reaching with Samuel Peng to compatible institutions and with Brown and Chavkin to people and groups who care about children. Finally, with its own house in order, the school community might press the process of community building outward, progressing in concentric circles of inclusion. Ultimately the school may become the lighthouse to the wider community that Timothy Bergen envisions, and by then the wider community may not seem so antagonistic after all.