

Background Information

Topic 4: Mapping Community Assets That Support Youth Success

Asset Mapping: A Strengths-Based Approach

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In the work of helping schools and communities contribute to youth success, it is common for people to concentrate on what the school community needs and how to make up for what it lacks. This approach focuses on deficiencies. We can take a more positive approach by asking different kinds of questions about our community to learn different kinds of things about where we live. We can create a map of our school community that tells us what and where the assets of our community are: This is the focus of a process called asset mapping.

What is asset mapping?

Asset mapping is a community organizing tool that involves everyone learning about what they and their community have to offer. It was, in large part, developed at the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute, a project of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. The institute was established in 1995 to disseminate the findings of John Kretzmann and John McKnight's two decades of research on capacity-building community development. As the institute explains on its Web page:

The focus they have brought to the gifts and capacities of individuals, to the vital role of associational life in communities, and the many resources of community institutions has transformed the traditional paradigm of rebuilding and regenerating urban neighborhoods. The ABCD Institute is redirecting the path—through training, new tools and further research—from the traditional “needs and deficiencies” approach to more effective methods of community building using assets to be found in our neighborhoods.

New kinds of maps and new ways of seeing our communities

According to John O’Looney (1998), “mapping describes a complex act that includes efforts to (1) understand the human world as a landscape that includes physical, sociological, and cultural aspects and values; (2) identify areas that exhibit a degree of unity; (3) explain why things are where they are; and (4) identify points of strategic opportunity for positive social action and policy development” (pp. 201–202).

O’Looney points in his work to the inequalities and biases that have characterized mapping historically. Maps have often been drawn for military purposes, taxation, or a census. “Only more recently has the idea of mapping communities for the purposes of human services planning taken hold” (O’Looney, pp. 201–202).

As McKnight (1987) puts it, the first step in developing strong, connected communities is to privilege community over institutions, which allows us to build “holistic environments (where) people of all capacities and fallibilities are incorporated, quick responses are possible, creativity is multiplied rather than channeled, individualized responses are characteristic, care is able to replace service, and citizenship is possible” (p. 6).

Participatory evaluation

A central feature of asset mapping is that it is a process done by community members. It is a hands-on activity in which everyone in the community can participate, and which cannot actually be completed until everyone has contributed his or her assets. As Harley, Stebnicki, and Rollins (2000) argue in their discussion of participatory evaluation: "Participatory evaluation ... is an attempt to bring about change 'through' rather than 'in' a community This focus is on enabling the community to shape the research and evaluation process by actively participating in all phases of ... development" (p. 349).

Asset mapping asks people to learn about themselves, their neighbors, and their community. Each community member is responsible to himself or herself and to his or her fellow residents. Moreover, in making an asset map, community members are not only in charge of their own processes of change and growth, they gain important effects as individual participants. According to Harley and colleagues (2000), participating in creating a map of assets, skills, and resources is a "process whereby individuals who belong to a stigmatized social category can, over the course of their lives, be assisted to develop and increase skills in the application of interpersonal influence and the performance of valued social roles" (p. 349).

Capacity building

In each community, within each person, is a capacity to achieve something of worth. How we recognize and encourage such capacity will have a great impact on how we build strong ties and communities. Building on existing capacities for growth and achievement also helps us avoid turning to outside experts for help. Communities have the capacity to develop themselves.

Community builders from diverse points of view agree that recognizing the contributions each person can make and valuing each person is the first step toward joining individual strengths in a strong, healthy community (Bellah, 1998). "Community associations are built upon the recognition of the fullness of each member because it is the sum of their capacities that represents the power of the group. The social policy map makers, on the other hand, build a world based upon the emptiness of each of us—a model based upon deficiency" (McKnight, 1987).

How it's done

In order to learn the strengths and capacities on which you can build, you must learn how to find what already exists in the people, places, and organizations in your community. Asset mapping allows people to come together and share what they have to offer each other and the community. Core groups can then involve wider and wider circles of community residents. With each new participant, and each new group represented, asset maps become more rich, inclusive, and comprehensive. If school administrators and teachers work with students and parents, there are various role perspectives offered as well as perspectives offered by differences across gender, class, and ethnicity. A group can draw a map and then invite new participants to view the map. The new people can add the resources and skills their perspectives may afford and of which no one in the initial group was aware.

There are many resources on community asset mapping available in print and on the Internet. There are discussions of the philosophy behind asset mapping, of how it might be used and among whom, and of the mechanics of making maps.

Resources

- Bellah, R.N. (1998). Community properly understood: A defense of "democratic communitarianism." In A. Etzioni (Ed.), *The essential communitarian reader* (pp. 15–20). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Harley, D.A., Stebnicki, M., & Rollins, C.W. (2000). Applying empowerment evaluation as a tool for self-improvement and community development with culturally diverse populations. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 31(2), 348–364.
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- Kretzmann, J.P., McKnight, J.L., & Sheehan, G. (with Green, M., & Puntteney, D.). (1997). *A guide to capacity inventories: Mobilizing the community skills of local residents*. Chicago, IL: ACTA.
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Web sites

- Search Institute
www.search-institute.org/communities/stories.htm
- Civic Practices Network
www.cpn.org/sections/topics/community/civic_perspectives/regen_comm.html
- The Asset-Based Community Development Institute
www.cpn.org/cpn/ABCDI/ABCDI.html