

PATHWAY NINE: GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY BUILDING

The Ready Schools Community-District Team actively seeks individuals and organizations within the local community to partner and collaborate with on Ready Schools Initiatives. In order for these partnerships to be successful, Grassroots Community Building is vital in gaining buy-in and sustaining interest in Ready Schools. Grassroots Community Building is not the same as social networking on the internet (although many groups use social networking sites to communicate news and events and to recruit members). Rather, Grassroots Community Building requires face-to-face contact with individuals who are considered leaders in the community and with those who have an interest in PreK-3 education.

Team members can assist by helping to identify people and resources from other organizations to support the Ready Schools Initiative. Look for opportunities to pool resources with other organizations doing similar work. Ask around in groups you belong to (church, civic, professional) to see if there are any business leaders or retirees who would appreciate an opportunity to serve the children in his or her community. Additionally, someone from the Team should be responsible for communicating with other "grassroots leaders" or "target" individuals and organizations to keep them informed of the Community-District Team's Ready Schools goals, work, and achievements.

We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.

– Cesar Chavez,
Civil Rights Activist



Key Understandings

- ▶ Grassroots Community Building is fundamental in creating an effective Ready Schools Initiative and Community-District Team.
- ▶ Grassroots Community Building requires a give and take interaction between Ready Schools Community-District Teams and local businesses, civic organizations, and community leaders and stakeholders.
- ▶ While social networking sites such as FaceBook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are useful in generating interest and keeping communities aware of what is happening with your Ready Schools Community-District Team, true Grassroots Community Building is accomplished through face-to-face, personal interaction with other individuals.
- ▶ Grassroots Community Building is an on-going process; it takes time to establish and maintain long-lasting, meaningful relationships with key individuals and organizations.



The Work

A successful Grassroots Community Building initiative requires that members of the Community-District Team reach out to individuals and organizations who either have a shared interest in PreK-3 education or whose work and involvement could be mutually beneficial to both parties. The Community-District Team also needs to recruit individuals and organizations that are not typically associated with PreK-3 education. The Team must communicate to all stakeholders that Ready Schools is not just about preparing schools to help children be successful in their early education but also to be successful members of the workforce when they become adults, thus enhancing the future of the entire community.



Who is Involved: Why and What are Their Roles?

All members of the Community-District Team should be involved in Grassroots Community Building. Each individual contributor on the Community-District Team has contacts in the larger community in which they live and work. For example, is there a retired teacher or school board member at your church who might be interested in getting involved with your programs as a volunteer? Other individuals you may want to consider making contact with are community center directors, military personnel, pastors, police officers, art outreach personnel, local NAACP members, etc.

Community-District Team Leader(s): Community-District Team leaders may already have relationships with leaders in the business community and in civic organizations. As a leader in your community, you may want to consider hosting a "Meeting of the Minds" with other local leaders. By bringing together a diverse group of leaders from your community for a round-table discussion, you may be able to create vocal, influential advocates for Ready Schools.



Early Childhood Professionals: Early childhood professionals are uniquely positioned to know and interact with the various services and organizations that support young children. Families who they work with, vendors who come through their doors, and contacts that they have developed through professional engagements all provide opportunities for Grassroots Community Building.

School District Leaders: One of the major responsibilities of school district leaders is to use their professional influence to improve educational decision making internally and externally. Effective school district leaders have built relationships with board members, state-level leaders, policy makers, community and faith-based leaders, and families and communities. School district leaders are charged with using their professional influence and relationships to bring about positive change for children.



Sustainability

Time

As mentioned earlier, it can take a substantial amount of time to build and maintain meaningful, enduring relationships with key individuals. Since many of the targeted people are already pressed for time and resources and may not be able to attend a Ready Schools Community-District Team meeting, it may be beneficial to occasionally attend their meetings. For example, if you have made a contact within the Boys and Girls Club, find out when their next committee meeting is and come prepared to talk about how Ready Schools can help support the Boys and Girls Club. If you give your time to others, others will be more likely to give their time to you.

Presence

Look for children's events in your community and plan to attend, even if you are not participating in the event. Your presence will speak volumes to other individuals and organizations; it shows that you care about children, their success, and their well-being. By attending other organizations' events, you have the opportunity to meet with and talk to like-minded individuals; remember, Grassroots Community Building requires face-to-face contact and personal connections. While you are there, exchange contact information and ask some of the leaders and members of that organization to come to one of your events.

Inclusion

Another way to plan for sustainability is to look around the table at your next Community-District Team meeting and ask the question, "Who is missing from this table?" Are there certain groups or demographics that are not involved in planning for and implementation of Ready Schools efforts in your community? A diverse Team has the ability to pull from many different resources in your community and it provides a representative voice for all groups (See the Respecting Diversity Pathway). Adding new members can provide a fresh outlook for everyone. Sustainability can be a difficult part of Ready Schools work. Ready Schools Community-District Teams must make a concerted, on-going effort to build and re-build relationships not only in the community but also on the Team.

Anytime there is anything going on with children in our community, our Ready Schools Community-District Team has a presence. Without continued efforts on our part to reach out to our community, we would not be able to sustain our momentum and accomplish our mission

– Community-District Team Leader



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

1. Does your Community-District Team send Ready Schools' emissaries/ambassadors to meet face-to-face with other people and organizations doing similar work in the community?
2. Does the Community-District Team have a strategy for engaging stakeholders and gaining buy-in from champions? Does the Team identify target individuals to approach?
3. Do you have a continuous plan for recruitment and development of your Community-District Team?
4. Do you create opportunities for individuals to participate without coming to a meeting?
5. Are there organizations or individuals who organize child-oriented events, fundraisers, or seminars and who would consider allowing the Community-District Team to participate by giving a presentation or setting up an information table?
6. Does your Community-District Team have a multi-media plan in place to educate stakeholders, citizens, community leaders, and policy makers?
7. Has your Community-District Team identified additional sources of funding (e.g., grants, private donors, in-kind donations, civic groups, local community foundations)?
8. Does your Community-District Team tie the Ready Schools Initiative to other relevant, established initiatives in the community?
9. Does your Community-District Team have an interagency coalition to guard against duplication of work?
10. Does your Community-District Team pool resources with other agencies in order to fill in gaps in regards to funding, manpower, and resources?





Taking Action

Key Strategies

Ready Schools Ambassadors

Ask community leaders and other stakeholders to consider being a "Ready Schools Ambassador." This person could be a retired schoolteacher, a pastor, a Kiwanis Club member, or military personnel whom you engage to represent your Community-District Team within that individual's sphere of influence. Oftentimes, influential individuals within your community can assist with asking local businesses for support, recruiting volunteers, and providing much needed manpower to complete Ready Schools work. Having several "Ready Schools Ambassadors" in your community can also help ensure that common goals are communicated through common language.

Change Meeting Times and Locations

Contact organizations that are already working with children and ask if your Ready Schools Community-District Team can hold a meeting at their location. Examples of possible organizations to approach are literacy councils, Boys and Girls Clubs, Optimist Clubs, Rotary Clubs, faith-based groups, libraries, Communities in Schools, non-profit arts centers, Latino/Hispanic Outreach organizations, and community centers. Changing the meeting location and/or time accomplishes several goals: 1) it allows more individuals from across your community to participate in meetings because the change in location may be closer to their home or work and/or the change in time make it more convenient for them; 2) it engages individuals from other organizations in Ready Schools work through face-to-face contact and opens up dialogue; and 3) it allows your Community-District Team to find out what other organizations are doing, thus providing future opportunities for collaboration.

Leadership Training

One way that the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) has engaged its local community is to offer Grassroots Leadership Training to leaders in local organizations. While the training is intended to help grassroots organizations build and sustain effective leaders for their own work, DEPC has experienced success in that some of those leaders have joined the Ready Schools Community-District Team. Also through the training, local community leaders learned about the Ready Schools Initiative and some decided that a collaborative effort between DEPC and their own organizations would be mutually beneficial.



Action at a Glance

- Recruit community members to represent your Team as Ready Schools Ambassadors.
- Change meeting times and locations so that a greater number of individuals can be engaged and involved.
- Consider hosting Leadership Trainings or a Leadership Roundtable Discussions in your community.



Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Funding

Funding can always be a challenge. When other organizations are strapped for resources, it may be difficult to gain buy-in from those groups with whom you wish to engage and/or collaborate.

- » Stress the benefits of collaboration. While it may seem overwhelming at first for some groups to join your efforts, point out how the partnership can be mutually beneficial. For example, if your local Hispanic Outreach organization is having a family fun night, you could offer to set up a Ready Schools table with a craft activity and assist with providing some light snacks.

The "One More Thing Syndrome"

Oftentimes, individuals and organizations feel that they simply cannot put one more thing on their plates, especially during tight economic times. There may be some resistance at first, but keep in mind that Grassroots Community Building takes time and relationship building is key.

- Once you have made contact with target individuals in your community, consider inviting them to meet you for a cup of coffee. A quiet talk between two people can often reveal what barriers/challenges someone is facing within their own organization and provides an opportunity to build trust, respect, and potential solutions.

Recruiting and Sustaining a Diverse, Representative Team

One of the biggest challenges in Grassroots Community Building is recruiting diverse individuals and organizations who are not typically associated with PreK-3 education.

- » Teams should be representative of a range of diversity found in the community such as race, culture, language, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status. In addition, they should include individuals and organizations from both the public and the private sector. The key in getting individuals and organizations from the private sector involved is to communicate that Ready Schools work is about not only preparing schools to help children be successful in their education but also preparing students to be successful in the workforce when they become adults.

Language and Seeking Common Ground

Since most organizations have their own "language," it may take time to find a common ground.

- » It is helpful to have a solid understanding of all Ready Schools Pathways and to have some conversation starters, or an "elevator speech," readily available. Working as a Team on this very short speech (that could be delivered in the time that it takes to ride an elevator) promotes consistency in Team Ready Schools language.
- » Here's an example of an outreach opportunity, imagine you meet a local NAACP representative at a friend's cookout, he or she may not immediately see the connection between what the local chapter of the NAACP is working on and the mission, vision, and goals of Ready Schools. However, if you mention that an important part of the Ready Schools Initiative is Respecting Diversity, then you are establishing common ground on which to connect and share ideas. Once you have made a connection, don't hesitate to exchange contact information. You may find that inviting your new friend to a Ready Schools meeting to talk about diversity in the community will open up dialogue within your own Team and possibly lead to future collaborative efforts.

For more resources see Appendix J, Resources for Pathway Nine: Grassroots Community Building at the end of the Toolkit.



Ready Schools in Action:

The Down East Partnership for Children and “Ready Communities”

The Down East Partnership for Children has created an outreach program called Ready Communities designed to build the capacity of a diverse group of engaged community leaders around early care and education.

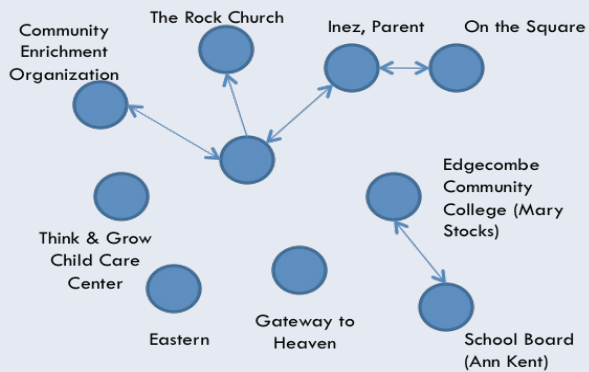
The Ready Communities Initiative includes strategies that help to identify and recruit community leaders, provide training and technical assistance in order to build the skills and knowledge needed in a strong leader, and connect leaders with opportunities to serve in their community. Visit <http://www.depc.org/Pages/Comm-ReadyCommunities.html> for more information.

Paired with Ready Schools, these efforts are known as Ready². Within the context of Ready², the Down East Partnership for Children encourages leaders to engage private citizens, parents, early childcare providers, faith-based organizations, civic organizations, and businesses. The initial goal for the Ready² process was that by the end of the school year, the participating schools would have made contact with at least one individual from each of the following groups:

- ☑ Business,
- ☑ Faith-based organization,
- ☑ Civic organization,
- ☑ Early care provider,
- ☑ Higher education institution, and
- ☑ Parent.

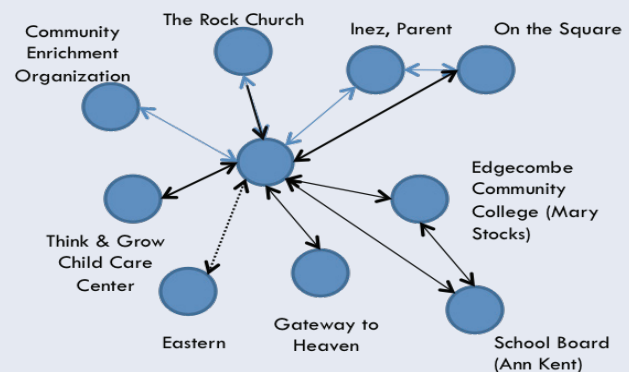
Through the contact, the schools could share information about the Ready Schools Initiative and involve individuals in the efforts. The graphics below are an example of how the Ready² process changed the grassroots networking opportunities for Princeville Montessori School.

Before Participating in Ready²



Princeville Montessori

After Year One



Princeville Montessori

Graphics created by the Down East Partnership for Children.

Key:

The light lines indicate relationships before the implementation of Ready².

The dark lines indicate the relationships in place after the implementation of Ready².

For more information regarding Ready², contact the Down East Partnership for Children: website: www.depc.org phone: (252) 985-4300

