



Harvard Family  
Research Project



## FINE Forum

### University–Community Partnerships

Family Involvement Network of Educators  
Harvard Family Research Project

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For questions or comments about this paper,  
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**About the Family Involvement Network of Educators:** Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a strategic effort to strengthen family and community engagement to support children's learning and development. FINE brings together thousands of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening family–school–community partnerships. Members get the latest information about family involvement research, as well as the opportunity to connect with others in the field.

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## From the Directors

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Over the course of the last year our nation has been forced to examine the meaning of citizenship in a pluralistic democracy. It is in this context that the FINE Forum features the Jane Addams School for Democracy (the School), in the West Side of St. Paul, Minnesota. In this university-community partnership, democracy is lived in the activities of Hmong and Latino immigrants, professors, high school teachers, parents, and students, who all work together on public issues.

For the School's diverse participants, being part of the American democratic tradition involves a commitment to participate in community issues, and not simply to leave important decisions in the hands of distant policymakers. Democracy is about co-creating solutions together. It implies that everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner. With these guiding principles, the School has tackled a broad range of issues affecting the West Side, including citizenship for immigrants, honoring Hmong veterans, family involvement in education, literacy, and better use of the community as a learning resource for students and teachers.

Program Spotlight describes the history, structure, and organization of this unique partnership and how the School puts democratic principles into practice. In Questions & Answers the four cofounders share their vision of the School. Parent Perspective highlights the voices of immigrants and explores how the School serves as a hub of family support and involvement in children's education.

Teacher Talk examines how the School connects teachers with the community so that they can learn about families and also enrich their own teaching and learning experiences. Student Voices describe how Jane Addams School for Democracy cultivates student leadership and starts them out on a path of life-long public work. Lessons From Leaders presents lessons about the ways communities and higher education institutions can work together for a common mission.

Some themes about teacher education emerge from the programs and reflections of our different contributors. Teacher preparation programs must produce teachers who can:

- Understand children in the context of their family and community
- Learn about ways to support families beyond their role as advocates of their child's education
- Make their practice welcoming to those who have previously felt “left out”
- Link their lessons to student's real life experiences
- Listen and learn from the students and youth they work with
- Become engaged in larger public issues
- Co-construct curriculum and experiences with their students and their communities

Finally, the Special Supplement analyzes the Jane Addams School for Democracy as an organization that models a relational culture and draws out the lessons for family involvement efforts.

To all those who contributed to this issue, we offer our deepest thanks: Nan Skelton, Nan Kari, John Wallace, Sandy Fuller, Sue Hendricks, See Moua, Kita Vang, Aleida Benitez, Howard Johnson, Plua Ly, Maria Elena, Cindy Xiong, Nick Longo, Craig Swan, and Margaret Post.

To our readers, we look forward to your comments and suggestions for future issues of the FINE Forum.

**Heather B. Weiss**  
**Founder & Director**

**M. Elena Lopez**  
**Senior Consultant, FINE Cofounder**

**Holly M. Kreider**  
**Senior Researcher, FINE Cofounder**

**Margaret Caspe**  
**Consultant**

## Program Spotlight

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### Featured Program: Jane Addams School for Democracy

The Jane Addams School for Democracy is a community-based education and action initiative, located in Neighborhood House, a 105-year-old settlement house in the West Side, a long-time immigrant neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. It was created in 1996 as a partnership among Hmong and Latino leaders at the Neighborhood House, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, the University of Minnesota (UMN), the University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts, and the College of St. Catherine.

The partners envisioned a community center through which neighborhood residents, college and high school students, and immigrants alike could effectively learn and work together. Inspired by Jane Addams' work at Hull House,<sup>1</sup> the School's vision is “to free and cultivate the talents, cultures, and interests of people from diverse backgrounds and traditions in order to add their energy and wisdom to the commonwealth.” A guiding principle at the School is that everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher.

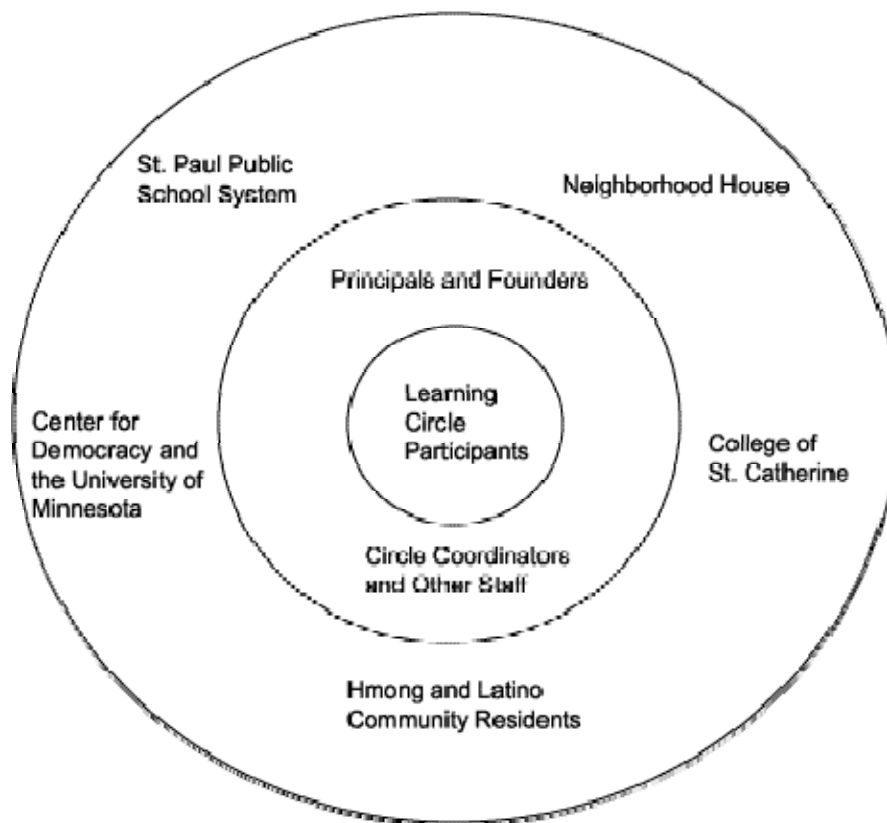
The School is a community of learners where:

- Immigrant parents and their children partner with high school and college students in learning about citizenship and democracy while at the same time sharing language, life perspectives, and stories. Hmong adults study for the citizenship test and Latinos build critical language skills. Through dialogue they gain a larger worldview of issues that affect their lives, both in the U.S. and in their home countries.
- High school and college students learn from Hmong and Latino participants about immigrant cultures and begin to understand public issues like education, housing, and health care from new perspectives.
- Faculty members participate as co-learners, sometimes partnering with immigrant participants—the “community faculty”—to teach their courses on site. They contribute to and learn from community-based educational activities.
- School district teachers learn about families and draw on the resources of community experts in curriculum planning.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1889, Jane Addams (1860-1935) opened Hull House in one of Chicago's immigrant neighborhoods. Hull House offered the people hot lunches, child care services, tutoring in English, and social gatherings. Addams tried to develop the idea of neighborhood spirit and convened immigrants, intellectuals, and reformers to discuss social issues. You can read more about her at: [www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/ja\\_bio.html](http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/ja_bio.html).

### The Jane Addams School for Democracy Organizational Chart



#### Program Implementation: Democracy in Practice

The School applies democratic principles that draw on an older commonwealth tradition in which citizens are “co-creators” of their communities. As such, participants develop a space for dialogue and action, and focus on a range of public work efforts both nationally and locally.

For instance, Hmong veterans, college students, and faculty worked to get congressional recognition for contributions of Hmong veterans during the “Secret War” in Laos. (A bill was subsequently signed to facilitate the citizenship process for Hmong veterans and their families.) Locally, young people and adults have undertaken farming projects, community gardens, plays and community festivals, health issues, gang violence in high schools, and a range of education-related projects.

Craig Swan, UMN Vice Provost, explains, “This is a partnership with people from the university helping immigrant populations understand our democratic traditions, but also our getting new perspectives about what citizenship and democracy mean to people who haven’t been born in the U.S. There is learning on both sides.”

The idea of a pluralistic democracy, where it is possible to achieve a common civic purpose out of the diversity of people’s backgrounds, finds expression in three School activities: learning circles, community projects, and engagement in public education.

## Learning Circles

The School adapts the “learning circle” method for teaching and learning, which emphasizes “lived experience” as a useful source of knowledge. Participants share leadership roles and work (and play) together in pairs or small groups—often intergenerational.

There are three learning circles: the Hmong adult circle, the Spanish-speaking adult circle, and the children's circle, with children of various cultural backgrounds. On Monday and Wednesday nights from 7-9pm participants gather at the School for cultural exchange and language learning.

In the Hmong adult circle most residents are studying for their citizenship exam. After a lively cultural exchange, participants break into learning pairs (Hmong speakers paired with English-speaking partners) or small groups for language practice. At the start of a session the pairs decide what they will work on (e.g., writing, U.S. history) and how best to go about it. Residents who have passed the citizenship exam often continue to participate at the School. Many have formed important relationships and wish to continue the ongoing conversation and language practice with their learning partners.

Like the Hmong adult circle, participants in the Spanish adult circle work in pairs to exchange language skills. The group also holds experiential learning sessions, such as potluck dinners, where participants share dishes connected to their cultural backgrounds and have conversations in Spanish and English.

Nan Skelton of UMN believes that sensitivity to an immigrant adult learner's life helps that individual accomplish her goals. She says, “We remove time constraints. We do not require a person to learn the material in six or seven months because people need more flexibility with time. We do not build in failure in the adult language program.”

Yet Skelton also points to the challenge of building a continuous and meaningful relationship between academic people and residents. “College students often don't have time to engage in the way ideally I would want. Also, the faculty may be teaching a course one semester with an internship option at the School and not teach it again for two years. However, the School is a place that nurtures creativity and some students have found ways to create jobs for themselves and extend their ‘internship’ to five or six years!”

The children's circle is a space co-created by the children, their older siblings, and college students. More than 60 children per night gather together, speaking a variety of languages—both verbal and nonverbal. While they make crafts, cook, read, and learn photography, the children also teach college students and all of the participants how to play, create, listen, and learn. They help students find meaning in and give direction to their academic studies.

Aleida Benitez, a graduate of UMN who guided the children's circle in its early years, recounts, “The children gave us ideas and felt they could contribute.” A big part of the children's contribution went into supporting their parents' struggle with the citizenship exam. When Benitez talked with the children about their parents' struggles to learn English and to pass the citizenship exam, the children shared their fears as well. Benitez says, “The children said things like, ‘every time I go to the grocery store I have to translate so how is my mom going to pass this exam with 100 questions?’” With the help of the

college students, the children embarked on a letter writing campaign. One eight-year-old girl wrote a letter to her senator, “My mom is studying really hard. Just try to ask her questions that she might know on the test.” (For more information on the campaign see Appendix I.)

## Community Projects

Community projects are collective public work efforts that bring to fruition the ideas and aspirations of the School's participants. Guided by the principle of co-creation the projects provide ample space for multiple contributions. As people work on these projects they gain the power to break down the barriers between formal and informal learning, and open new avenues to link local experiences with issues of national significance.

For example, a number of community residents aspire to share their knowledge and skills with students, but not in traditional classroom settings. The School has developed a summer institute to train local teachers to strengthen ties with the neighborhood, helping them identify people and projects that they can use as resources to enrich K-12 learning within and outside the classroom.

In another case, the academic partners considered doing a collection of stories of the Hmong people, but did not know how to develop it without reinforcing stereotypes about immigrants. The beginnings of a resolution came from the learning circles. A Hmong woman started telling her story of the trek from Laos to the refugee camps and her college student partner asked permission to write it down. The woman welcomed the idea and what emerged was a powerful story about the road to freedom. This led a group from the circle to begin framing a book about freedom and the different individual experiences that invigorate American democracy. It would include the stories of the Hmong as well as the descendants of European immigrants, all of whom became connected through the Jane Addams School. The resulting book was entitled, *We Are the Freedom People: Sharing Our Stories, Creating a Vibrant America*.

## Engagement in Public Education

The School provides a space where parents can develop the everyday political skills and confidence, not only to participate in, but to influence public education. The Community Education Program, sponsored by the St. Paul Public school district, provides an avenue for community residents to share their knowledge. Hmong and Latino parents offer courses in cooking and reading and writing in their native language. Through these classes schools are beginning to reframe their view of how parents can be involved in their children's education. Children also benefit from seeing their parents as teachers, and not just as recipients of social services.

The Partners in School Change project, sponsored by the Jane Addams School, provides a political space for parents to discuss school issues and organize for change. The program originated from parents' frustration with the schools' lack of responsiveness to parents. Although parents attended school meetings and provided input, there was no follow-up on the actions they asked schools to take.

A small group of core parents, with the assistance of the Jane Addams School, began to organize a series of meetings to train other parents about the school system and work on common concerns. In the spring of 2002 parents identified changing the school lunch menu as a focus of work. They went through a “power mapping” exercise to explore who were affected by the issue, who could be allies, and who would be the decision makers. They also identified their next steps, such as recruiting more community members to be involved, conducting a parent survey about the school lunch menu, meeting with the food services director, presenting a plan to the school board, and developing a media effort. As of this writing, the parents continue to organize on this issue. (To read the training agenda see Appendix II.)

## Evaluation

Recent evaluation of the activities and practices at Jane Addams School for Democracy highlighted areas of strength, as well as suggestions for further research to help improve practices and contribute to its evolving democratic theory.

Those involved with the School have learned some key lessons:

- Create public spaces in which people can engage in learning in an open-ended time frame. The pressure of time-bound programs is off-putting for many people, especially adults whose first language is not English.
- Engage in intentional deliberate work at the neighborhood level with parents, children, and community members so they can create ways with school systems, parks and recreation, library systems, and transportation systems to be responsive to local citizens.
- Include newcomers in the public life of the community by offering opportunities for people to learn and practice political skills and, over time, develop identities of productive citizens. This is essential for immigrant groups who come from countries without strong democratic traditions.

Compelling questions remain about the nature of the democratic spaces and practices that bring people together across lines of age, class, gender, and culture to decide what to do and how to work together.

- What are effective public practices in cross cultural settings?
- How does deliberation occur when not all are native English speakers?
- How do new immigrants learn the political process?
- What leadership development approaches work in settings with ethnic and cultural diversity?

These are some of the questions to be considered in ongoing assessment and evaluation. By paying attention to these processes, the School hopes to be better positioned to meet its lofty goals.

## Questions & Answers

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### Karen Childs and Jane Sergay Family as Faculty Program

*The cofounders of the Jane Addams School for Democracy share with FINE their vision and its realization. (Please refer to the Program Spotlight article in this issue for more information about the School.)*

*The cofounders include:*

- *Sandy Fuller (SF), former Director of Programs of Neighborhood House*
- *Nan Kari (NK), former Director of Faculty Development at the College of Saint Catherine*
- *Nan Skelton (NS), Associate Director of the Center for Democracy & Citizenship, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus*
- *John Wallace (JW), Professor of Philosophy, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus*

#### **Q: What was your vision in creating the Jane Addams School for Democracy?**

**NS:** Having worked in the community for many years, I had a sense of what happens in communities and neighborhoods. From that perspective I always thought universities had a great deal to offer communities, but they tended to be walled off. Community residents had little clue about how to access university resources other than sending their kids to college. Working inside academia, I also began to understand how hungry the students were to see the connection between their coursework and the real world.

What Jane Addams created in the late 1800's bore similarities to our vision for the School. Immigrants could come together to learn with students and faculty from the University of Chicago. If we could create a place with that energy and spirit we could better connect the university and community.

**NK:** I directed faculty development at College of St. Catherine and often thought, "How do we help faculty develop strategies for engaged learning?" It's difficult to make change in colleges within the existing structures. Part of my vision for the School was to create a laboratory that was part of the college, but not inside the college, where people could continue to experiment with learning in a new context and at the same time refresh the academic institution.

#### **Q: How did this university-community partnership evolve?**

**SF:** Nan Skelton from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship and Nan Kari from the College of St. Catherine approached Neighborhood House about opportunities for a university-community partnership. When we start something new in Neighborhood House, we get participants involved from the beginning. So we started holding

conversations with a variety of people about what the students would do and how they would connect to our programs. We had these conversations for a while and then we figured we just had to start. We put out an invitation for a community-wide meeting and over 60 people came.

**JW:** We held a dialogue with folks in the community and shared the dream of having students and community people working together, possibly on community action projects. We didn't come in with a preconceived idea about what people need or that these people have deficits and we have the ticket to fix them.

We asked what they thought about the idea and where they wanted to start. They said they wanted to learn English and take the citizenship test. I consulted several people in linguistics and asked, "Can it work to not have professional teachers?" They gave examples where it did work. Their expertise was important, but we invented the paired learning component as we went along—whereby students work one-on-one with residents on gaining citizenship.

**Q: *What is unique about the university-community partnership?***

**SF:** Too often when a community-based organization goes to a university it gets taken over. One of the unique things about the School is that it was truly a partnership. We sat together and talked about the characteristics of each of the partners. We looked at the values each of the partners had. We acknowledged we operate in different systems and have different missions to accomplish. So we created something with its own process and mission and values, while being respectful of the different systems from which the partners come. We are constantly working together to define ourselves and reflect on our issues in that shared area instead of just our own individual missions.

Another thing that has made our collaboration unique and successful is that people have been able to put power on the table. I was real suspicious at first. But I realized the project was worth discussing when I understood where the academics were coming from and that the people in our community would get benefits. This wasn't just someone coming and leaving. We had a unique group of people coming from UMN and St. Catherine who had struggled with the issues before coming to us. That was a critical ingredient.

**NK:** I love the diversity of people who participate. There are few places in my experience that draw such a mix of people—different ages, ethnic traditions, economic situations, and especially, lived experiences. We've learned how to create a "space" that invites lively public discussion among co-equals. Everyone contributes. We don't use labels or credentials to define who we are or what we can contribute. For me, it is a remarkable experience of the power of a democratic space. The learning and exchange that happens here is in sharp contrast with "normal" experiences of public life at work places or campuses.

***Q: Can you explain the philosophy behind your service-learning model?***

***JW:*** Our philosophy is embodied in a “space” that has the qualities of democracy, but infused by a spirit of equality and reciprocity. We use the slogan, “everyone is a teacher and learner.”

For example, we hold weekly meetings at the School and invite all participants. Students come and we problem solve and make decisions about the everyday operations. This counters much of what I’ve seen in other service learning efforts over the past 20 years, in which community placements treat students purely like worker bees without offering them any voice or understanding of how decisions get made in an organization.

I also wanted to make sure that students would be co-creating their community work with people. I did not want them to be on the receiving end of “scripts” as they had been in many college classrooms.

At the School we offer opportunities to learn English. But unlike many ESL programs, we avoid following an elaborate manual with various stages and exercises. Instead, every night the learning pairs—consisting of a student and a resident—decide what they will work on. Often, people work on the citizenship test, but the person trying to learn English and citizenship is being invited to make decisions about what to focus on—whether writing or U.S. history—and to co-create the way learning proceeds.

***SF:*** Within the School we threw out two traditional models: the one in which interns would come in with very prescribed things to accomplish and we had to make sure their educational goals were matched and figure out in that context how best to use those students, and the one in which the college could care less about students on work study. Instead, we have a different philosophy about how a nonprofit and a university or college relate to one another. The students come in and work with people in the community and develop what it is they will do. Students are fully engaged and must ask how their community service helps them better understand and amplify what’s happening in the classroom.

***Q: How does the Jane Addams School for Democracy deepen student learning through community service?***

***NS:*** Students discover the sense of the possible. Some of them stay for five or six years and create jobs for themselves. The students find ways to realize their creativity in a nurturing environment. One of our students who did not have experience working with young children became very creative in the children’s circle. When I asked her how she did this, she responded “the children taught me.”

***JW:*** Students develop a sense of acting as a professional, by gaining experiences that will offer them choices in how to interact with future clients of various kinds, such as co-creating open spaces and solutions with clients.

**SF:** If we have accomplished nothing else but the pride students have developed about being Hmong and developing their language proficiency in Hmong [by serving as interpreters and participating in learning circles], that's enough. I have heard Hmong students say, "I was Hmong and I was running away from being Hmong and wanted to be American. I turned my back on everything that reflected backward people. At the School I saw the college professors with people like my parents and learning from them. That was the same stuff my parents told me and I didn't listen to them. Now these smart people are learning from my parents."

College students who are not Hmong gain a strong commitment to community and working with people. They have stayed involved or go to work in other nonprofit programs that serve communities. In this way, the essence of how we do things at the School transfers to other organizations.

**NK:** Students come to understand in greater depth what freedom means. They learn about history in very concrete and powerful ways. For example, during the Vietnam War Hmong men and women worked on the side of the United States providing reconnaissance and rescue assistance for downed U.S. pilots when the military was not allowed in Laos. Hmong villages were equipped with radio communication so they could be contacted when planes were shot down. Hmong are skilled mountain people, and when called, they would search for the pilots and bring them to their homes. I remember one poignant conversation between a group of students and Hmong veterans, who told the students, "We've always wanted to meet again with the soldiers who stayed in our homes in Laos. We know now that's not possible. But you are their sons and daughters, and we would like to tell you about your fathers."

## Parent Perspective

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*The Jane Addams School for Democracy provides families with a network of support and opportunities to become involved in their children's education both as teachers and advocates.*

*Maria Elena Escoto is a native of Mexico who immigrated to the United States seven years ago. Through the School she discovered a strong support network that enriched her language and literacy skills and self-confidence. Maria Elena now teaches a class in the Children's Circle at Jane Addams School to help bilingual children learn to read and write in their native Spanish language.*

[Translated from Spanish:] When I came over from Mexico City, I didn't know anyone in the United States. I was introduced to the Jane Addams School through my daughter's school. At first I had reservations, but eventually went and found a wonderful group. It was a huge support. The group made me feel safe to share my ideas.

My involvement focuses on language and learning English. I like how everyone is included and allowed to participate. Immigrants feel a part of it. When I got here, they said we are all teachers.

At the School I have learned about American culture, but at the same time learned to value my own culture. Before the School I hadn't realized all the wonderful things about being Mexican. I met many different people from many different cultures. I now invite other parents to become part of the School.

*Plua Hang Ly arrived in the United States in 1979. She and her family were part of a large wave of Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees who entered the country after the Vietnam war. She became involved with the Jane Addams School in its first year and gained citizenship in August 1999. Plua exemplifies how a non-native English speaker can become a teacher and change agent in the public school system.*

*First, through the Community Education Program sponsored by the St. Paul school district, Plua has been paid to teach community courses. Participation by Plua and other Hmong and Latino parents has helped reframe the school district's thinking about involving immigrant parents, as well as helped children appreciate their parents as teachers.*

[Translated from Hmong:] Two years ago I taught Hmong cooking with my daughter Judy. In Hmong cooking there are no recipes, you do a little of this and a little of that. But for this class I had to think about all the particular ingredients of a dish and how someone else could cook it. My daughter and I spent a lot of time translating from Hmong to English and putting the recipes on cards for the students. I handed the recipes to students in the class and told them to try to follow it. I was there to answer questions if I was needed.

The classes were taught in Hmong and English. My daughter Judy would translate. The students loved the egg rolls, biscuits with egg whites in the middle with sesame on the surface, and the sticky rice.

Second, Plua has participated in the Partners in School Change Project, which grew out of immigrant parents' frustration with the lack of influence they had in their children's school.

One of the issues we've been working on is changing the school lunch menu. Many of the children don't eat during the school day because the food is too greasy or they are lactose intolerant. They prefer having chicken, rice, or other Asian foods as an option, which they don't have.

We parents are concerned that a lot of the kids in our community have poor literacy skills and are not doing well. We want to help our children do better. The problem is, we're not informed about our kids' progress. Parents also don't know what to ask or how to ask and get the details.

Parents go to conferences and teachers are not specific or honest about how kids are doing. If a child is doing well, the teacher will say, "Oh, they're wonderful." If the child is average, the teacher will say he's doing okay. If a child is doing poorly teachers say he is doing okay, but then report cards come and they're not getting the grade we want. How can teachers and parents communicate better? How can teachers tell you more and help you help your child? We want to figure out a way to better communicate with the schools and teachers so we can help our children succeed.

## Teacher Talk

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*The Jane Addams School for Democracy provides a “public space” for teachers to connect with the community and enrich their own teaching and learning experiences.*

*Kita Vang is a history and social studies teacher at Humboldt High School. Impressed by the welcoming and inclusive environment at the Jane Addams School, she has become a vocal proponent of making schools accessible to “families who are left out.”*

Through my participation in the Jane Addams School I heard the concerns of parents from all over the city of St. Paul, and their concerns mirrored those of parents from my high school. I was then able to attend staff district meetings and say, “I know parents from all over our schools who want to get more involved, but language is a barrier.” Some of us teachers who got together through the Jane Addams School talked to our superintendent about how parents wanted to better communicate. I have met with school staff that work in the district with other ethnic populations and talked about what families need to know. They said, “Let's have some informal settings where we can bring families in, talk about new policies, and how it impacts them.” In the past this never happened.

What the Jane Addams School does well is allow parents to be at the same table as anybody else, even though parents speak a different language. So, when we had our school meeting, I sat through a three-hour session of translation in Hmong and Spanish, with key players in the school system talking about changes in school policies. Then families broke up into their own language groups and raised question about issues they didn't understand.

*Nan Kari is a cofounder of the Jane Addams School. In 2002 she helped organize a summer institute for K-12 teachers in West Side schools to strengthen the link between schools and the neighborhood and to reflect on teaching as vocation. Teachers who participate in the institute and seminars throughout the year can earn graduate credit from the University of Minnesota College of Continuing Education.*

The West Side community is rich in learning resources and “community faculty.” There is a whole cadre of people who are not certified teachers, but who care about education and want to be resources to teachers, such as the man who runs the local Youth Farm and Market Project. The teacher institute makes that connection between community resources and schools happen. This summer, teachers designed learning projects that take students out of classroom, into the community. Teachers will implement projects in the coming school year and assess the learning outcomes.

Another purpose of the institute is to create a space where teachers can explore the civic dimensions of teaching. We used learning circles to reflect on questions about teaching and vocation. The often poignant discussions surfaced frustrations of experienced teachers trying to do their work creatively in an environment with many

external controls. Teachers spoke about the rigidity of the curriculum and said that it often “gets in the way of good teaching.” They also found creative energy in conversations about vocation. People reflected on how they might reclaim their initial passion for teaching. (See Appendix III for the course syllabus.)

*Howard Johnson is a senior army instructor at Humboldt High School Junior ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Core). The mission of the Junior ROTC is to motivate young people to be better citizens.*

One of our Hmong cadets went to Neighborhood House where her parents were taking citizenship classes to prepare for the naturalization exam. She told me about the Jane Addams School and I thought this would be an outstanding project for student involvement with the community. Teaching immigrant parents and others who want to become US citizens—what a perfect match for our mission of citizenship. So we started sending lots of cadets down there.

Because of the emphasis on [academic] standards other things like service learning tend to get put on a back burner. But here at ROTC it's different because we do have graduation standards that focus on service learning. Of those who go to Jane Addams School, at least half want to join AmeriCorps. They want to do their schoolwork and contribute—little or big—to the community.

*Sue Hendricks directs the core curriculum at the College of Saint Catherine and teaches a course on the sociocultural aspects of clothing. Some of her students participate in the Jane Addams School, teaching Hmong adults to prepare for the citizenship test and learning from them about Hmong culture.*

I wanted my students to study Hmong dress and to learn about the Hmong through a more personal experience, not just reading and looking at pictures. My students and I meet as a class at the Jane Addams School, with the Hmong women teaching us about their culture and dress. The course makes the students more aware of other cultures' perspectives and of what happens when people are displaced and lose the traditional skills, all the handmade work, when they move to a culture of mass production.

The students keep a journal and my sense is that their experience at the School is life changing. Although they may be peripherally aware of the Hmong in our city, it is through the School that they come to appreciate the dedication and struggles of the Hmong, especially as they are trying to gain citizenship. (See Appendix IV for the course syllabus.)

*Aleida Benitez worked with the children's circle over the course of five years. Her emphasis on understanding children as connected to the families and community in which they live reflects her child-centered philosophy.*

The few of us coming into the children's circle didn't have backgrounds in working with youth. Instead, we learned a lot about how to work with youth from the youth themselves. We came in trying to figure out what it is the kids wanted to do and how they wanted to spend their time. We did a lot of projects that applied to everyone since we were working with the older and younger kids together. We would have physical activities, arts and crafts, photography, or cooking.

One of the most important things about working with youth in a community is building strong and healthy relationships with the youth and their families, and discovering how they make sense of the world around them. We try to understand youth not as one-dimensional, but as connected to community, parents, schools, and friends. Children are always trying to teach us to see them on all sorts of levels. We need to see a child not just as a kid who is bad at math, or lacks other skills, but for his assets and strengths. There are a lot of different roles kids take and they are not always seen as the complicated selves that they are.

## Student Voices

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*The Jane Addams School for Democracy cultivates leadership in students of all grades and ages, allows them to explore their culture and identity, makes their learning meaningful through service learning, and starts students out on a path of life-long public work.*

*See Moua is a recent graduate of the College of St. Catherine. She has been involved in the School since its inception and today leads the children's circle, summer camp, and the Parents in School Change Project.*

I have always wanted to do something for the Hmong community. During the summer of my junior year in college, a number of us brainstormed what the Jane Addams School would look like. I did a lot of translation and outreach to the community to survey them and see what they wanted the organization to look like. That was my first experience in co-creating with a group of people.

My beginning years at the Jane Addams School were sometimes confusing. It was challenging because it was a little disorganized. I wasn't always sure of what I should do. But once I started it was very rewarding. We're so used to having people tell us what to do and having direction. It was hard at first to just create my own route. I am thankful now to have had the experience, because in life no one tells you what to do; you have to figure it out for yourself.

*Cindy Xiong is a sophomore in high school and has been involved in the School since fifth grade. Through the school she has learned much about her family, culture, and own identity. At the same time, her family has learned much about her.*

I'm flattered when people think of my generation as the next leaders and as a link between American and Hmong cultures. When I think about it, I'm shocked that I've done so many things at such a young age. For example, in the summer of sixth grade, a few of us went to Washington, D.C. We had been writing letters to senators about our concerns that the Immigration and Naturalization Service was unfair to people taking the citizenship test. We lobbied in Congress for the Veteran's bill; one of its provisions allowed people who helped the U.S. in the Vietnam War to take the citizen test in their native language. It was a bill that would help the majority of our parents because our fathers fought in the secret war. My parents have struggled so much, especially my dad. It's good that I can do something.

Now I'm involved in the Homeland Project. This coming December we want to take a trip to our parents' homeland in Laos and Thailand. We want to be in their shoes and see why they push us so much here in American. We, as teens in the first generation, adapt more to American culture and do things that our parents don't understand. At the same time, we don't understand them, and there is a lot of miscommunication. We want to take this trip to understand our parents better, and to come back with this knowledge to explain it to other youth.

*Margaret Post graduated from the Hubert Humphrey Institute in 2002 with a graduate degree in public policy.*

I first started by helping a Hmong woman named Xia study for the citizenship exam. Our relationship lasted over a year and a half. The experience gave me insight into the spirit of the School and the spirit of citizenship. The opportunity to work together for a concentrated amount of time was a critical ingredient of my graduate experience. It made me think about organizations in a completely new and different way. I started thinking about the meaning of activist and catalytic management, public work, and how public work influences organizations. I was struck by the institutional partnership that formed the School, the ways the staff worked together, and the relationships that the immigrant community had with the residents and college students and one another. I became passionate about describing what was making the School so unique.

*Nick Longo was also a graduate student at the Hubert Humphrey Institute. He currently works at Campus Compact, a national organization of college presidents supporting the civic mission of higher education.*

My experience at the School began two nights a week. I was there for the first semester as part of a class and after that went back and continued to work there over the next four years. As an undergraduate I had done a lot of service learning, but at the School it was different: I had more ownership, I was in it for the long term, and my community work was connected to policy work.

The School gave me a different sense of how policy can be co-created with people in a neighborhood. Policy doesn't have to be top-down, but can be bottom-up. I now work for Campus Compact and I've transferred the essence of how we did things at the School to our national efforts to engage college students in public life. I'm directing a national student civic engagement campaign where we are trying to unleash the power of college students to create a more vibrant democracy. My experiences with the School showed me that when the right type of space is created for students and community residents to learn together, democratic change is possible.

## Lessons from Leaders

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*Fifteen people associated with Jane Addams School for Democracy—including university faculty, community leaders, parents, teachers, and students—share lessons about the ways communities and higher education institutions can work together for a common mission.*

They offer lessons specifically for universities:

- Begin with a big idea—not just the little partnership in your community—but how to bring people together around lines that divide us.
- Learn to negotiate the cultures of the community and academia, producing that which is new, but respecting the mission of each entity.
- Listen and learn from the community; avoid the “expert” model and the notion of “fixing” communities.
- Understand that learning about the community comes from being an engaged observer, not a detached researcher or evaluator.
- Encourage faculty to participate in service learning opportunities; they can then engage students in deeper reflection and see how their theories play out in the world.
- Include in community negotiations university/college representatives that represent faculty as well as practitioners.
- Provide forums for students to reflect on what they are learning—for example, through workshops and seminars that allow students to make meaning of their community experience.
- Strategize ways to build faculty and student engagement through one-on-one conversations with faculty, publication in university/college newsletters and journals, and presentations before campus student groups.

They also offer lessons specifically for communities:

- Keep in mind that you are a critical entity of the partnership bringing in people with knowledge and experience.
- Create space for innovation among community people and university people; develop a culture of the possible.
- Provide concrete skills and experiences for participants around school and community involvement and individual development.
- Offer something for everyone—children, students at the high school and university levels, and adult citizens and noncitizens alike—to establish commonality and trust.
- Create a family atmosphere whereby people have opportunities to network, meet other people informally, and develop relationships with people across generations and cultures.
- Commit for the long term; it takes time to build relationships and co-create the work
- Remember that relationships are key; it is people that make a partnership

## Related Resources

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### About the Jane Addams School for Democracy

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Vang, K. (1998). *The relationship between cultural retention among selected Hmong parents and the academic achievement of their children*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of San Francisco, San Francisco.

Yang, S. V. (1998). *The impact of the home environment on Hmong children's academic performance in the education system*. Unpublished master's thesis, California State University Stanislaus, Turlock.

### **About School-Community Linkages**

#### ***Communities at Work: A Guidebook of Strategic Interventions for Community Change***

This report from the Public Education Network describes how nonprofit community-based organizations dedicated to increasing student achievement in public schools are building broad based support for quality public education. It offers strategies other groups can use to advance reform including community dialogue, constituency building, engaging practitioners, collaboration with districts, and policy and legal analysis.

#### ***Community Schools: A Handbook For State Policy Leaders***

The Coalition for Community Schools has released a primer to help guide state policymakers—governors, state legislators, chief state school officers, and leaders of other state agencies—through the vision of community schools.

#### ***Helping Every Student Succeed: Schools and Communities Working Together***

This guide was developed to help communities and schools use study circles to improve student achievement. It was written with the help of both local school leaders and community groups.

## Special Supplement

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### Building Relational Culture at the Jane Addams School for Democracy

*Margaret Post is a graduate of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and participated at the Jane Addams School for Democracy between 2000-2002. This special supplement synthesizes ideas from her Master's thesis. Post describes how the School creates a "relational culture" whereby relationships among participants and community drive the organization's success.*

### Relational Culture

"Culture" is an important component of the life of any organization. It often shapes an organization's structure and core practices and also adapts them to environmental opportunities and constraints. In the words of Daft (2001), "Culture is the set of values, guiding beliefs, understandings, and ways of thinking that is shared by members of an organization and taught to new members as correct."

In a relational culture, relationships exist at the center of an organization's mission and drive its design. Frequently, the organization exhibits a "horizontal" orientation: hierarchy is relaxed, responsibilities and tasks are informally allocated, decision making is largely decentralized, and learning is emphasized. In this configuration, the organization increases the opportunities to nurture a sense of efficacy, agency, and ownership (Weick, 1976).

### A Relational Culture at the Jane Addams School

The Jane Addams School grew out of an institutional partnership between the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, the University of Minnesota, Neighborhood House, and the College of St. Catherine with the intent to build relationships with immigrants and across interested organizations and institutions. The School is an intergenerational learning environment where people learn language, study citizenship, share culture, and develop strategies for making change in the larger the community. [Please refer to the Program Spotlight article in this issue for more information about the School.]

A relational culture exists as the foundation of the School. The School strives to make the norms of partnership, creativity and flexibility, celebration of identity, and commitment to democratic processes guide and shape policies and activities.

### Partnership With Trust and Accountability

The School fosters a dynamic community through relationships where participants are both teacher and learner. Reciprocal relationships develop through learning pairs, small group conversations, and collective work. In turn, these learning opportunities foster an environment where trust can develop over time.

The School believes that all people have something to contribute and that the interests of all participants shape the practice of public work. This belief provides the

grounding for responsibility and accountability. Staff, college students, and community residents are encouraged to develop their ideas into plans of action. For example, youth are implementing a plan to travel to Laos and Thailand to explore their native history and culture. They meet regularly as a group with adult advisors, but are responsible themselves for all project planning and fundraising.

Externally, a relational culture guides how individuals from the School adapt to the environment. For example, growing out of frustration with Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) processes, participants at the School sought to build an ongoing positive relationship with the INS. After persistent attempts, they met with the INS director to express their interest in working with him to address their concerns. The relationship with the director yielded positive results, with the School being one of the only organizations where participants may accompany test takers as nonparticipant observers.

### **Creativity and Flexibility**

From the beginning the School chose to free itself of restrictive structures. According to Nan Skelton, one of the School's cofounders, the organization avoided stifling creativity with remarks like "My supervisor won't let me." Rather, and in some cases for practical reasons, the organizational culture fostered exploration and creativity; if you can figure out how to make it happen, great! The development of the Children's Circle is a prime example. Many children accompanied their parents for citizenship preparation because childcare was unavailable. Because the children needed something to do, Aleida Benitez, a participating college student began to organize activities for them. Six years later, Benitez became a full-time staff person to coordinate the activities and projects of the Children's Circle.

### **Celebration of Identity**

Celebration of identity is a central component of the School's relational culture. Staff and participants design intentional mechanisms to celebrate identity and share culture. Activities, events, and organizational practices are shaped by the multiple relationships among participants and staff. The School invites participants to share their traditions, cultures, and individual stories which have become integrated in the day-to-day rituals, such as the cultural exchange, the learning pairs, and reading time in the Children's Circle.

In the cultural exchange participants meet in a large group and share stories, such as the history of struggle among Hmong and Latino communities and experiences of taking and passing the citizenship test. The learning pairs offer college students and community residents individualized ways to learn about citizenship and freedom. Reading time in the Children's Circle offers students and families a place to come together to share literature in cultural and interactive ways. Occasional events, such as parent education dialogues, the 2001 St. Paul Candidates' Forum, and the Freedom Festival, an annual festival honoring new citizens and the civic work of all School participants, have emerged as

important public events that celebrate achievements and make visible the issues that matter to members of the School community.

### **Democratic Space for Public Action**

The School provides a space where people can raise and discuss internal and external issues. Opportunities for continuous reflection and evaluation enable multiple stakeholders to have a voice in the work of the organization. Together, the organization and its participants learn as they go. Mistakes are made, however a regular process of reflection and evaluation engages individuals and partners in collective problem solving and planning. During reflective sessions, participants name lessons learned about effective practice, reassess how to work differently, and adjust to more effective modes of practice.

Public issues that concern the School's participants include: education at West Side public schools, parental involvement in school decision-making structures, and federal citizenship legislation. Through public conversations, like those in the cultural exchange and at the weekly planning meeting, the staff and participants can problem solve and make shared decisions about how best to respond to the changing public environment.

In addition, the School has access to key decision makers in large public agencies like the INS and St. Paul school district where participants can call on individuals within these institutions to assist in work on issues that surface in the community. These alliances are based on relationships of mutual understanding and trust that have developed over time. While these relationships take time to develop, participants, including community residents, take on different public roles, and begin to understand the power of their public leadership. Over time, public officials and leaders in the community have become more aware of the School's members as key decision makers who need to be at the table.

### **Implications for Family Involvement Initiatives**

Relationship building is an essential component of effective practices for family involvement. The experience of the Jane Addams School suggests that family involvement initiatives can work toward deepening relationships with families and communities in the following ways:

1. Develop specific mechanisms for relationship building.
  - Make paired learning or work opportunities a regular part of the activities of your organization.
  - Invite children, families, other community members and staff to work in small issues groups.
  - Host social events, like community festivals and potlucks, as well as large public meetings focused on public education issues.
  
2. Root your work in a guiding philosophy and common mission around interests of families and their children.

- Engage organizational participants in discussions about what issues and concerns matter to them and their families. Strategize together ways that the organization can work to address these issues.
  - Always leave a meeting with next steps and some kind of action plan. Most important, make efforts to intentionally invite people to participate. These individual connections will have lasting value for the organization and for its work.
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3. Integrate families into the every day work of the organization by fostering an environment where participants are invited to co-create organizational processes and practices.
- Consider a variety of practices, including weekly planning meetings open to all members of the organization, monthly reflection and evaluation sessions, retreats, and other long-term planning sessions.
  - Invite all participants to share in the deliberative process of determining the work of the organization by developing ongoing opportunities for public dialogue and debate as well as reflection and evaluation.
  - Engage all people as teachers. Do participants bring a particular skill to your setting? How can you as the organizer facilitate their participation as teacher?
4. Design action agendas to grow out of a community's concerns.
- Share the leadership of meetings. Develop action plans with parents, children, and their families in an ongoing way—not just for approval.
  - Invite parents, young people, and other community members to take on specific roles like facilitator, timekeeper, note taker, etc.
  - Develop collective processes for determining strategies-including opportunities for public debate and dialogue about issues and possible action steps.
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