

## **Asset Mapping and Resource Guide Development in Partnership with Title One Schools**

**Julie Williams Merten, PhD MCHES**

**Elissa H. Barr, PhD**

Department of Public Health  
University of North Florida  
Jacksonville, Florida  
USA

**Heather Monroe-Ossi, MEd**

**Mona Vosoughi, MA**

Florida Institute of Education  
University of North Florida  
Jacksonville, Florida  
USA

**Jessica L. King, MSH, CHES**

**Stacey Griner, MPH, CPH**

Department of Behavioral Science and Community Health  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida  
USA

### **Abstract**

**Background:** Poverty significantly affects student achievement. Asset mapping is a community development model used for revitalizing communities by building on a community's strengths rather than its challenges. **Objective:** Describe how asset the mapping process was used to develop neighborhood resource guides in five Title I school neighborhoods. **Methods:** Roundtable discussions with community stakeholders yielded local resources. Researchers worked with community partners to identify assets and create resource guides. **Results:** Special efforts must be made to keep stakeholders focused on assets rather than perceived barriers. Brochures may be more valuable than electronic resource guides in impoverished neighborhoods. **Conclusions:** Improving outcomes for students living in disadvantaged neighborhoods requires collaboration at every level. Neighborhood asset mapping provides a platform for beginning the process.

**Keywords:** asset mapping, resource guide, elementary school

### **1. Background**

Poverty is a significant factor that affects student achievement (Pellino, 2006). To close the achievement gap between children from low socioeconomic homes and their more affluent peers, community stakeholders must work collaboratively to provide all children with rich learning opportunities, inside and outside the classroom (Epstein, 1995). To address this need, the Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative (JNGI), is adapting a general model for convergence to an educational setting by building networks and collaborative partnerships in low-income neighborhoods served by Title I schools (McGrath, 2008).

Efforts include child-focused and school-based collaboration at the neighborhood level. Neighborhood Learning Networks (NLNs) developed from collaborative efforts of the Florida Institute of Education (FIE) and Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) serve as the focus for the documentation process. The Title I Family Involvement Centers (FICs) serve as the anchor sites for each of the neighborhood level networks. The JNGI will also document the process of building a “network of networks” among neighborhoods and the community-wide public and private organizations that are currently working to improve the learning and social development outcomes for children in the NLNs.

The five NLNs are using the process of community asset mapping as a strategy to support convergence among schools, neighborhoods, and families. The asset mapping project was piloted in Jacksonville’s Arlington NLN. Following a review of the pilot implementation, the refined strategy was then be replicated in other local DCPS NLNs (College Gardens, Eastside, Ribault, and Springfield).

### **1.1 Asset Mapping**

Asset mapping is a community development model most often used for revitalizing communities by identifying and building on a community’s strengths (assets) rather than its challenges (deficits). This strategy begins by analyzing strengths currently present in a community, including “the capacities of its residents and workers, the associational and institutional base of the area – not with what is absent or problematic” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). See Figure 1.

The types of assets in a community can be organized in three categories: individuals, organizations, and institutions. The process is strength-based, internally focused, and driven toward building supportive relationships among local residents, local organizations, and local institutions as a means of developing and enhancing neighborhood capacities.

When thinking of strengthening neighborhoods, particularly those experiencing economic challenges, the focus is often on deficits or needs that exist in their community. A needs-based approach focuses on factors missing in the community and relies primarily on external support (Pinkett, 2000; Turner & Pinkett, 2000). Deficits and weaknesses are identified within a community and typically reflected in a map targeting needs such as neighborhood illiteracy, teen pregnancy, and criminal activities.

A needs-based approach hinders community members from taking control of their future (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Not only does this approach direct funding to service providers such as public, private, and nonprofit human service organizations instead of community residents, but it also identifies and targets residents as consumers of services (Beaulieu, 2002). When residents think of themselves and their neighborhoods as “deficient” and “incapable,” they lose the incentive to take charge of their lives. Most importantly, the needs-based model does not encourage relationships to be formed from within. Residents seek the help of experts as opposed to developing links of support internally, within their neighborhoods.

In contrast, an asset-based approach begins with internal strengths, capacities, and skills available within the neighborhood. By concentrating on strengths, the asset mapping approach encourages local community members to support the community using collaborative practices among schools, community organizations, and institutions. The asset-based approach begins by identifying assets from individuals, organizations, and institutions, then mapping and mobilizing these assets. In order to capture the richness of a neighborhood, it is vital to collect detailed information about three types of community assets (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Through this process, local residents and groups develop a sense of purposefulness in reshaping the culture of the neighborhoods in which they live.

## **2. Objectives**

1. To provide an overview and rationale of how the asset mapping process can support a model of convergence focused on improving children’s learning and health.
2. To explain the Community Based Participatory Research strategies used to develop a series of five neighborhood resource guides in Title One communities.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 The Asset Mapping Process**

The asset mapping process begins by first pinpointing or mapping neighborhood assets that already exist within the community. Identifying assets among individuals is an important step in the asset mapping process. The skills, knowledge, and talents offered by the individuals residing or working in the neighborhood should be inventoried. For example, a capacity inventory, demographic information about people, places, and services available in the neighborhood, is often used to identify local individuals who are willing to volunteer their time, skills, knowledge, and commitment. These individuals may include local business owners, active parents, community activists, and retirees. Local individuals identified through the capacity inventory process are critical to building relationships among assets and are considered to be the heart and soul of community building (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996, p. 7).

In addition to identifying the talents and skills of the individuals, community organizations must also be inventoried.

These organizations might include neighborhood service clubs, women's organizations, athletic groups, and fraternal organizations. Local business associations are invaluable and should be included but are not often found in older, low-income neighborhoods.

The third focal point for building neighborhood capacity is inventorying institutions. Institutions include businesses, government, and agencies such as schools, libraries, and fire stations. Large-scale community organizations such as United Way are likely to be considered institutional assets. Similar to government agencies, United Way programs support both individual neighborhood residents as well as the city at large. In developing community asset maps, three important questions must be answered (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996).

- 1) Who are the individuals, organizations, and institutions that can act effectively as the asset development champions in the neighborhoods?
- 2) What types of neighborhood-wide research, planning, and decision-making processes can be used to strengthen children's learning in the neighborhoods?
- 3) What connections can be made to resources located outside the neighborhoods to strengthen the learning of children outside the classroom?

The process should include as many residents of the neighborhood as possible in both the discussions and decision-making. The goal is to develop community-building strategies that account for the interests and strengths of residents by building the power to define and control the future of the neighborhood from within (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996). By developing inventories of individuals, organizations, and institutions at each level, relationships are developed among assets. Connecting and mobilizing all of the neighborhood's assets help develop and strengthen the NLN's capacity to shape and exchange information internally to improve children's learning. The goal of these internal partnerships among the identified and mobilized individual, organizational, and institutional assets is sustainability; this occurs when the combined resources are multiplied in power and effectively work together over time (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

### **3.2 Using Community Based Participatory Research to Develop the Resource Guide**

The elementary school principals served as a key research partners. The principals expressed the need for the community resource guide. In coordination with the researchers, the principals sent formal invitation letters to members of the School Advisory Council (SAC). The letter included project information and an informed consent form to be returned at the first scheduled SAC meeting. The monthly SAC meeting served as a community roundtable to identify existing neighborhood resources in one of the following sections: learning, wellness and social and emotional development. Parents, school administrators, staff and members of the research team attended the community roundtables. The research team was allocated the first 30 minutes of the SAC meeting, followed a detailed session plan (interview guide) to facilitate the session, and another member of the research team took field notes on an Apple iPad.

Community roundtable participants were provided with pencils and worksheets to record their contributions. This approach worked well with quieter participants who didn't actively participate. The worksheets had blocks for agency name, services provided, contact, costs and accessibility to families. These worksheets were cross-referenced with the de-identified field notes to check for additional community resources.

The research team investigated each resource and wrote brief bullets in literacy-level appropriate language summarizing the services. Cost was of particular importance and each resource was classified a free or low cost. Resources deemed expensive or ones that didn't offer a sliding income scale adjustment were exempt. When the draft Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was returned to community roundtable participants for feedback, the participants clarified misleading descriptions, improved descriptions to be more audience appropriate and added additional resources suggestions.

The field notes were reviewed and all noted resources were identified for further investigation. Each resource from the roundtable was located on Google Maps, the address was confirmed to be located within the Spring Park neighborhood, the organizations were called to verify contact information, and their websites were reviewed for an overview of their services. Each resource was listed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with their name, cost (free or low cost), address, phone number website and bullet points of their services. They were further categorized into one of the three aforementioned sections. The draft spreadsheets were sent to community roundtable participants and key informants identified by the school principal for their feedback.

The finalized Microsoft Excel file was sent to the Florida Institute of Education's graphic design department along with a how-to use graphic. The how-to use section encouraged participants to take advantage of the listed resources because the organizations were designed to help the community, coached them on asking the right questions and explained the layout of the brochure. The graphic design department used bright eye-catching colors in the brochure design with relevant symbols to identify each section. The brochures also listed community partners who contributed to the development of the brochure.

Upon feedback from the lead researcher who thought the brochure appeared cluttered, each section of the community resource guide was reduced to eight organizations. The 24 resources (eight from each of the three sections) were chosen from the recommendations of the community roundtable participants rather than the resources located by the research team, windshield surveys, or Internet technology.

#### ***4. Lessons Learned***

As with the nature of focus groups and roundtables, a vocal leader emerged in most meetings and the facilitator worked to involve all participants. Those who used the meeting as their soapbox for Spring Park Elementary complaints were redirected back to the overall purpose of the community roundtable.

The research facilitator was deliberate in emphasizing the assets of the community rather than the shortcomings. It should be noted that some participants were eager to discuss what they didn't have, the barriers to usage and other neighborhood concerns. The research team made note of the concerns but they were not pertinent to the overall aim of the project, and somewhat, counter to the goal of recognizing the abundance of existing community resources. Perhaps, the development and presentation of a formal community resource guide filled with useful resources will change those attitudes.

Based upon feedback from the community roundtable, the decision to print a paper resource guide was chosen over an online version. Many parents and families in the Spring Park area don't have regular Internet access. The printed version would also be easier for the Family Liaison Coordinator and Guidance Counselor to aid parents in their search for help. They preferred a document they could write-on and highlight specific resources rather than referring parents to a website.

Final brochures will be printed (n=1000) in mid August to be distributed to parents during the back-to-school party the weekend prior to the beginning of the school year. Parents not in attendance will receive the brochure through a take-home kit during the first week of school. Remaining copies will be distributed to the Family Liaison Support Center (onsite classroom funded with Title One money with three Internet capable computer designated for parental use) and Guidance Counselor.

The Spring Park area of Jacksonville is abundant with resources designed specifically for parents to use to enhance the out-of-classroom learning and indirectly improve academic achievement. There was an apparent disconnect between the availability of resources and the community members awareness of these services. Another notable issue is the discovery that many families don't live in the school neighborhood. They commute from areas all over Jacksonville and even surrounding counties.

Some parents were districted to attend the school because their local school was full or over-crowded, they exercised their Title One entitlement to move to Spring Park from another failing school, or they worked in the Spring Park area to receive special permission for their child (ren) to attend Spring Park Elementary. This situation is particularly challenging when the point of neighborhood schools is to create a sense of community among parents, teachers and the schoolchildren. When students are commuting from all over the county and beyond, it is difficult to foster a sense of belonging. Additionally, parents outside of the area are not as invested in the neighborhood, may not use the resources or get involved in civic projects. This problem is beyond the scope of this project and speaks to the overall strategy of school districts, further reinforcing the need for widespread school reform.

This project is robust in many ways; the support of the principal, the involvement of the SAC, the thoughtful feedback from the participants and the resources available from the grant funding. The notion of creating scaffolding to empower the community to understand their community assets and provide a tangible resource for all community members, has powerful potential for community empowerment.

There are limitations because the participants on the SAC are established and involved members of the school, given their volunteer efforts serving on the SAC. Engaged parents are not necessarily the most vulnerable to being unaware or not being involved in their child's out of classroom learning.

The SAC members are among the most involved stakeholders in the community, and perhaps their initiative could encourage other parents to become more vested. The cost to print high-quality glossy resource guides in full color with the aid of a graphic design department is a significant barrier. The Florida Institute of Education has created the template for the school's continued use and the school may opt to use black and white copies on a lower quality paper with a hyperlink on the main school website to the full color version. The Spring Park community is a microcosm of impoverished community schools struggling to involve parents in student learning and the local community. They face challenges of demanding Department of Education benchmark standards, teacher retention, student readiness to learn and parental involvement. The community resource guide development infrastructure is easily modifiable and transferable to other school given the support of a willing principal. The importance of the principal cannot be overstated; he or she is simply imperative for project success to mobilize the SAC and cheerlead the project.

## **5. Conclusions**

One major challenge today's educators face is how to improve the learning and social development of children from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Low-income neighborhoods often have barriers that impede collaboration. The need for collaboration and partnership among the school, home, and community and the benefits for student achievement are supported by several research studies (Epstein, 1995; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; McGrath, 2008; Pellino, 2006; Weiss, Coffman, Post, Bouffard, & Little, 2005). A collaborative home-school partnership helps to "engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own success" (Epstein, 1995, p. 83). Shared responsibility for children's learning among the school, home, and community enhances the children's overall learning experience and level of engagement.

It is clearly evident that the task of improving collaboration in low-income neighborhoods cannot be accomplished without intentional and explicit support from all stakeholders. Improving educational outcomes for students living in disadvantaged neighborhoods requires collaboration at every level of society, particularly families, schools, and communities (Bofford, Goss, & Weiss 2008). Research indicates that by focusing on the assets found within a neighborhood, local efforts can be supported to improve children's academic achievement by strengthening the collaboration among schools, families, and communities in order to improve the quality and availability of outside the classroom learning experiences (Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes, & Malone, 2009). Neighborhood asset mapping provides a platform for beginning the collaborative process.

**References**

Fantuzzo, J.F., McWayne, C., Perry, M.A. & Childs, S. (2004). Multiple dimensions of family involvement and their relations to behavioral and learning competencies for urban, low-income children. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 467-480.

Greenberg, P. (1969). *The devil has slippery shoes*. New York: Macmillan.

Langemann, E.C. (1993). Parents – a new keyword in education. *Teachers College Record*, 94, 677 - 689

McMillan, M. (1921). *The nursery school*. London: J.M. Dent & Co.

Powell, D.R. (1989). *Families and early childhood programs* (Research Monographs of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Vol. 3). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

Taylor, J. (2005). Achieving excellence in urban schools: Pitfalls, pratfalls, and evolving opportunities. *Negro Education Review*, 56(4), 259-331.

**Figure 1: Concept Map Identifying Examples of Community Assets**

