

Human Development Education and Youth Development

Issues:

Relationship between neighborhood health and quality of schools

In discussions throughout the planning process, the quality of local schools was viewed as having a great impact on the health and vitality of the neighborhoods. The issue is a challenging one. There are misperceptions about the local schools. Residents need to know the realities in order to make informed school choices. Furthermore, magnet schools represent a double-edged sword for community viability. On the one hand, they increase the school choices available. On the other hand, often the most motivated and education-conscious families opt for magnet schools and, therefore, there is the perception that “those who can, opt out.”

Collaboration between school and community

Throughout discussions on education, there was strong sentiment that priority must be placed on the elementary schools of Fulton and Dilworth. There is a strong desire to leverage neighborhood energy and skills to collaborate with these schools. Often, problems require more support than the school alone can provide. It is necessary to involve other outside agencies to help families resolve the basic issues that must be addressed before children can learn. Whether in parenting training or life skills, families need to be supported in order to support their children in learning. Finally, the community needs to work toward change through the existing school structure.

Initiatives on this front have already begun. Education Innovations, Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Highland Park, is developing a series of programs to complement and shore up existing educational opportunities. Recognizing that community organization may not have a great role in reforming practices during school time, Education Innovations proposes to provide the community with mechanisms to improve the quality of out-of-school time. The Learning Club, a unique learning and resource center, offers learning support services to children in grades Kindergarten through 12. SchoolSynapse™, currently being developed by Education Innovations, will be a network of connected out-of-school time programs that are radically different from what has previously been developed across school districts. The programs will be focused on a specific curriculum area, offer year-round learning opportunities, involve local communities, and be district-wide. NatureLAB™, the first of the SchoolSynapse™ initiatives is an ecology-based, technology-infused out-of-school time experience. It will combine learning based on-site at the school with learning that happens at other organizations around the City.

Goal: Improve the public schools serving Highland Park residents and residents' perceptions of those schools.

Strategies:

- Create improved access to information about area schools
 - Provide centralized information for current and prospective parents
- Assess and address needs of schools that can be impacted by community
 - Physical needs
 - Extra-curricular programs
- Forge partnerships with the Public School Administration
 - Create mechanisms for communicating schools' needs to community
- Support initiatives of Education Innovations, Inc., targeting opportunities to improve the quality of out-of-school time
- Capitalize on opportunities for community to influence change in schools
 - Develop local leadership for education
 - Open up dialogue with Parent School Community Councils
 - Organize to testify at hearings of the School Board
 - Utilize bulletin boards and other mechanisms to educate and mobilize the community

Human Development Arts, Recreation, and Youth Development

Issues

Need for better communication

Throughout focus group discussions, residents expressed an interest in better communication among community members along with a need for better access to information about resources and programs. Although there are existing communication channels, such as church bulletins or the Community Club newsletter, there appears to be a need for coordination of these communications into a central location. Information kiosks, real or virtual, would be very useful to broaden knowledge and use of current resources.

Community art and recreational facilities: maximizing resources

Parents commented on the need for more indoor recreational facilities for their children, including swimming, basketball, and other sports and activities. Such facilities can provide opportunities for older children and teenagers to gather after school and on weekends as well as providing more intergenerational gathering places. However, given the presence of other facilities in nearby neighborhoods, attention should be given to both maximizing the resources that exist in Highland Park and strengthening connections to facilities outside of, but in close proximity to, the community.

The challenge is to increase the utilization of facilities in the community and to link them in a way that establishes an identifiable network of community center facilities throughout the community. For example, the newly established Union Project will provide a community place for a host of activities ranging from performance and visual arts to spaces for informal gathering or the establishment of local businesses. Peabody High School's swimming pool has, previously, and could presently, provide a locale for neighborhood swim night. The renovated Highland Park Farmhouse holds classes in the arts, sponsored by the City of Pittsburgh's Parks Department, and houses a community meeting facility open to neighborhood usage. Saint Andrew's Church not only provides community meeting space for a raft of organizations and constituencies, but houses an after-school tutoring program and a creative writing workshop open to the community at large.

Through an identification system, such as a Highland Park community place logo or other marker, and by providing a map or directory of resources, these facilities and programs could be identified and linked. This "virtual" community center would be in place of proposing a new, centralized community center development. Finally, the network of community places should also include exterior open space and the connections between them.

Engaging youth through the arts

A strong link exists between community health and youth development. Through informal and formal programs, participants in focus groups shared experiences and expressed their belief that

the arts provide a strong avenue for engaging children and youth in positive activities and relationships. The mission of the Union Project recognizes this need and is positioned in a key location to reach out to youth at risk and engage them in a broad range of arts activities. In addition, the proximity of the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative and other activities in adjacent neighborhoods provide opportunities for youth involvement. The challenge, as already stated, is to strengthen the connections among this range of resources.

Goals:

- Identify and publicize all after-school and summer programs in the community
- Provide a broader range and greater number of recreational activities and venues for Highland Park youth

Strategies:

- Link activities and programs via “virtual community center”
 - Collaboration among all providers
 - Common marketing
 - Develop marker/identifying element
- Organize and implement the year-round “Highland Park Youth Group”
 - Identify an adult volunteer advisor
 - Establish teen core
 - Identify volunteer and recreational/arts activities
 - Establish senior yard help project
- Utilize recreational/arts activities to connect Highland Park to adjacent communities
 - Support development of Union Project
- Utilize farmhouse for activities
- Take opportunities to bring together youth and adult activities
- Shore up and develop additional after-school and summer recreational programs for school-age children
- Create opportunities for artists to create and showcase their art, including young people.
 - Classes, galleries, performance space

Human Development Community Health and Safety

Image of Highland Park

Throughout discussions on public safety, an interesting paradox emerged: that Highland Park is perceived by residents, in general, as a safe place to live, but public safety is one of the most important issues for the community plan to address. On one hand, residents feel strongly that improving the perception of public safety is key to attracting and retaining quality residents and homeowners to the neighborhood. On the other hand, for the most part, they say that they themselves do feel safe.

Part of this apparent inconsistency could be related to the fact that certain parts of Highland Park, such as the “southwest quadrant,” famously experience higher levels of crime than other parts of the neighborhood. This could lead to inaccurate perceptions of the entire area as being crime-ridden. Another factor may be that some of the types of crime that are prevalent in Highland Park, such as drug-dealing, give the neighborhood a ‘reputation’ for crime, but might not necessarily strongly impact residents’ perceptions of their own safety.

Property maintenance is another important issue that relates to the image of neighborhood safety. In order to achieve its goal of promoting a healthier community image, Highland Park will need to approach the problem from two sides: to address legitimate community safety concerns, and to work to correct inaccurate perceptions of poor public safety.

Crime in the neighborhood

Highland Park’s struggles with crime and safety clearly go beyond needing to address faulty perceptions about the neighborhood. There are real public safety concerns facing Highland Park. Most prevalent among these is the thriving, and by many accounts growing, drug trade in the neighborhood. Drug dealing is not isolated to those portions of Highland Park that are usually thought of as ‘troubled,’ but occur throughout many of the ‘safer’ parts of the neighborhood as well. Much of the drug trade involves people who do not actually live in the neighborhood. Highland Park has become a destination for others to come to sell and buy drugs. Many residents feel powerless to stop this, and say that the police, although willing to help, don’t seem to be able to do anything to stop it, either.

Aside from drugs, other public safety concerns are prostitution, gunshots/violence, car theft, and noise issues (some of which may relate to the drug issues), mostly concentrated in the southern portion of the neighborhood. Dilapidated properties in that area ‘create inviting places’ for illegal activity to occur. Highland Park’s location next to the only major park in the area leads to “situational” crime occurring at homes along the routes that kids take to walk to and from the park. Residents are afraid to report crimes for fear of retribution. The recent reorganization of the police from Community Oriented Policing to functional teams of officers only adds to the uncertainty of residents about how to address these problems.

Goals:

- **Create a safe, drug-free community block by block**
- **Develop a safe community image**

Strategies:

- Reinvigorate Community Club Public Safety Committee into community-wide Committee
- Develop network of active Block Watch groups
 - Address Block Watch burn-out
 - Connect Block Watches to neighborhood institutions
 - Utilize National Night Out for organizing Block Watches
- Build awareness of the role of police through community/police partnerships
 - Encourage Block Watch members to enroll in Citizens Police Academy training
 - Develop institutional complaint process to allay fears of retribution
 - Publicize and distribute silent complaint forms
 - Department of Public Safety Silent Complaint Form
 - United Citizens Against Narcotics (U-CAN) Silent Complaint Form
 - Adopt-a-cop: Community appreciation event
- Nominate problem blocks for Targeted Areas Program for problem blocks
- Advance “no trespassing sign” program, based on Manchester Citizens Corporation model, to eliminate loitering and illegal activity
- Create an information-sharing network in Highland Park regarding crime and safety
- Publicize the positive aspects of the community and the progress made in public safety