Building a Network of Community Educators

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College

Evaluation Report
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Executive summary

Teachers often try to meet every need of every student on their own. Expecting teachers to do so is unreasonable — and there are other options. Community educators can provide academic and social support for students, helping teachers deepen and personalize learning for each student. Networks of community educators expand students' social networks, providing access to diverse knowledge and experience.

Community educators are talented adults from the community who bring additional capacity, insight and expertise to learning environments.

A K–8 district in the West Valley (West Valley District[1]) partnered with Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University to study how the district currently uses volunteers and community organizations, as well as to identify action steps that can support ongoing development of a network of community educators. MLFTC interviewed 23 administrators, faculty members and community educators from three West Valley schools: West Valley Middle, Coyote Canyon and Liberty Elementary. This report outlines the results.

> *I've been on a lot of school campuses over my career, and I have never seen these partners come together like they do at Liberty Elementary.*
>
> *— Liberty Elementary literacy coordinator*

What is currently happening in West Valley District?

West Valley schools collaborate with a variety of **groups and organizations.**

- Nonprofit organizations
- Arts programs
- Church groups
- Public service workers
- Local universities and colleges
- Physical and emotional health specialists
- Parents and community volunteers
- Students from secondary schools

Volunteers and organizations provide many **different types of support**.

- Academic support: mentoring, tutoring, classroom support and enrichment programs
- Financial assistance and support for families
- Nutrition, health and safety education
- Social work and counseling
- Professional development for teachers
- Parent education
- School fundraisers and facility support

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[1] All school and district names are pseudonyms

What community educator roles and tasks might be useful?

Research participants described **useful roles** for community educators.

- Assist teacher in classroom by **monitoring or supporting** groups or individual students
- **Mentor** students
- Share **unique experiences or skills** that connect to curriculum
- **Support** student projects
- Provide **specialized services** such as counseling or behavioral support
- Lead **parent education** programs

What knowledge, skills and dispositions do effective community educators need?

Research participants identified knowledge, skills and dispositions of **effective community educators.**

- **Knowledge**: understanding West Valley curriculum and teaching strategies; specialized expertise
- **Skills**: adapt interactions for age of student, communicate well with teachers and students, teach in an interactive and engaging manner
- **Dispositions**: adapt to new situations, exhibit dependability, show enthusiasm and positivity

What are barriers to finding and collaborating with community educators?

To identify and collaborate with community educators, schools must overcome several **barriers**.

- **Identify** interested individuals and organizations
- **Communicate** with potential community educators (including having accurate contact information for volunteers)
- Encourage community educators to **complete paperwork** process
- **Schedule** school visits (difficult for working parents to volunteer as most opportunities occur during the school day)
- Provide **physical space** for activities
- Support community educators in acquiring **needed knowledge, skills and dispositions**

What policies and practices support community educators?

Policies and practices can support collaboration with community educators.

- Adequate **funding** for contracting specialized community educators
- **Systemic support** for identifying and training community educators
- Systems for **orienting community educators** to the school and district
- **Cultural practices** that support communication and collaboration

Recommendations

Based on the results, MLFTC suggests **three recommendations** for building a network of community educators.

1. Establish **processes and systems** for **identifying** community educators.
2. Create a **clear and simple process** for **registering** community educators and **orienting** them to the school/district context.
3. Offer on-demand **educational resources and training** for community educators.

It's not a matter of one person bringing you together; it's a matter of all of us bringing each other together . . . because at the end of the day, our main focus is these children and these families.

— Liberty Elementary principal

Full report

Introduction

Today's teachers primarily work independently, using their expertise to serve only those students in their own classrooms. Although most teachers are powerful advocates for their students, expecting them to meet every need of every child is unreasonable. At the same time, individuals and organizations in the community with unique areas of expertise can provide the extra support students need. Although many schools use community resources and volunteers to improve outcomes for students and families, efforts are rarely systematic, limiting schools' ability to fully leverage the power of community expertise.

In her book, "Who You Know," Julia Freeland Fisher emphasizes the importance of children's social networks. Children from low socioeconomic communities often have limited social networks with few connections to those from other socioeconomic strata. This limits their social mobility because the strength of social networks impacts lifetime success. Schools, however, can strengthen children's social networks. Fisher writes, "The goal of our education system … should be to arm all young people with networks that can reliably expand access to support, guidance, new opportunities and positive life outcomes."[2]

The importance of strong interpersonal networks relates to the theory of connectivism — that learning in the digital age should be centered on connecting a diversity of people, ideas and information sources. Learning and innovation scholar George Siemens writes, "[The] amplification of learning, knowledge and understanding through the extension of a personal network is the epitome of connectivism."[3] Effective social networks link individuals to diverse community assets — the knowledge and experiences that live in community members. When students deepen their social networks, they gain access to a wider range of community assets.

One approach to capitalizing on community assets and helping students develop powerful personal networks is to create a network of community educators. **Community educators** are talented adults from the broader community who

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[2] Fisher, J. F. (2018). *Who You Know: Unlocking Innovations That Expand Students' Networks*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, p. 4
[3] Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, *2*(1).

bring additional capacity, insight and expertise to classrooms. In contrast to volunteers who work with students once or twice a year, community educators play an active and recurring role in students' growth and development. Working a few hours each week, these individuals can complement the work of professional teachers. They empower students to make connections between the curriculum and the "real world," and they support individual student needs. Community educators include working professionals, business owners, veterans, retired teachers and others with valuable skills who can support the efforts of educators.

West Valley District strives to build a network of community educators to support students and families by collaborating with many volunteers and organizations. To learn more about what is happening in the district and to identify directions for further development, researchers at MLFTC interviewed 23 administrators, teachers and community educators at three West Valley schools. They learned how the schools currently collaborate with community partners, and about participants' perception of other potential uses of community educators. Researchers also asked participants to list dispositions of effective community educators, the barriers to finding and collaborating with community educators, and the processes and systems that support community educators. This report concludes with recommendations for building and supporting a network of community educators in West Valley District.

> *If you can become a school that embraces the outside world, it's only going to help your kids be more rounded students, and [help them] recognize that there's just so much out there.*
>
> — *Coyote Canyon principal*

What is currently happening in West Valley District?

Focus group participants described a wide range of volunteers, community members and organizations that contribute to school communities. Some regularly assist at their school while others provide one-time or as-needed support. Types of volunteers, community educators, and organizations include:

- **Nonprofit organizations:** United Way, Read Better Be Better, Make Way for Books, YMCA, New Leaf shelter, Arizona Autism, American Heart Association, Green Team Urban Farming, National Center for Families Learning, Heart for the City
- **Arts programs:** Childsplay Theatre Company, Desert Edge Choirs, Young Rembrandts
- **Church groups:** Catholic Charities, Palm Valley Church, River City Church
- **Public service workers:** Local fire departments, Phoenix Firefighters, School resource officer, Luke Air Force Base
- **Local universities and colleges:** Arizona State University (Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, School of Social Work), Estrella Mountain Community College
- **Physical and emotional health specialists:** Bayless Integral Health, Southwest Behavioral Health, Mountain Park Health
- **Parents and community volunteers**
- **Students from secondary schools:** Astoria Community High School, National Honors Society

Volunteers support schools in many ways, including assisting with fundraisers, mentoring students, supporting parent education programs and student arts programs. Categories include:

- Academic support: mentoring, tutoring, classroom support, and enrichment programs such as career exploration and arts programs
- Financial assistance and support for families
- Nutrition, health, and safety education
- Social work and counseling
- Professional development for teachers
- Parent education
- School fundraisers and facility support

In the classroom, community educators work with small groups or individual students. This often includes reading to children or working with them on core skills. The extra support helps teachers meet the needs of all children. Other volunteers share career information with learners, giving them access to a variety of potential careers. Many teachers have capitalized on the diversity of community members, inviting individuals to return each year to share their unique skills and experiences.

Coyote Canyon: Deepening the Curriculum through Collaboration

Coyote Canyon Elementary excels in utilizing community volunteers to provide academic support and enrich the student experience. Volunteers, whether they be parents, community members or nonprofit organizations, deepen the curriculum through real-world connections.

For example, the assistant principal described a World War II veteran who talked with students about the war. The veteran provided a concrete connection to the abstract concepts students were studying in history. The assistant principal explained:

> Then the kids were learning about that . . . see[ing] the real-world situation and then also the history of it. Just those connections . . . real-life connections, making it back to these things actually happened in the real world.

The assistant principal also described a student's grandfather who shared his rock collection with students. The volunteer connected with the students and engaged them in the presentation. After his visit last year, the students ran to the playground to identify the types of rocks found on the school grounds. They were able to directly connect geological concepts to the rocks in their environment. Coyote Canyon research participants also described visits by a phlebotomist, a butterfly collector, a dentist, a firefighter and a SWAT team member. Volunteers gave students practice in interviewing skills and spoke about various careers. Each deepened students'

What community educator roles and tasks might be useful?

In addition to describing current uses of volunteers and community educators, researchers asked focus group participants what roles and tasks they would like community educators to assist with. Some of the responses aligned with current practices, but each response emphasized an area in which external partners would provide support beyond what faculty and staff are currently able to offer.

Some suggestions included additional adults who can help with monitoring and supporting students, allowing for various groupings during instructional time. Others emphasized the unique assets community educators bring to the school. For example, participants expressed interest in community educators who can share unique

West Valley Middle: Building networks through mentoring

Local firefighters wanted to support local schools. West Valley Middle School was looking for some extra help. Representatives of each met at a School Cafe where community partners — such as libraries, church groups and public service organizations — come together to share ideas about how they can collaborate to serve the community. Conversations led to a mentoring program in which 13 firefighters mentor two students each. The firefighters discuss classes, grades and attendance with students.

Students were selected for the program based on need, and the principal did their best to match personalities of mentors and students. The school accommodated the firefighters' needs by allowing them to meet with students on a flexible schedule. Firefighters visited the school when they had free time, meeting with students in the school office.

The principal noted the program has been particularly impactful on students who do not have many positive adult role models. The firefighter mentors "take ownership of their students" and many have formed strong connections. It is not easy — the principal noted it has been difficult for the mentors to see "the things that [the students] go through; the pain, the difficulty." But the firefighters persist. Their dedication and consistency provide students with much-needed stability.

West Valley Middle's partnership with the firefighters has led to connections throughout the community. For example, when the school was looking for additional academic support, the firefighters reached out to Estrella Mountain Community College and recruited volunteers for after-school tutoring. Partnerships such as these connect the school and the community, creating an environment in which all work together to support students and families.

experiences or real-world applications of the academic curricula. They recognized the ability of community educators to connect learners to new ideas, events and experiences. Community members could also offer personalized support for students, such as guided exploration of crafts, music or technologies.

Another prominent category of potentially useful community educators is specialists such as social workers, counselors, dentists or behavior coaches. Research participants also suggested community outreach experts could help meet the financial and physical needs of families.

The tasks and roles identified by participants can fit into three overlapping categories: supporting teachers, students and families.

I simply don't think that we could be as successful as we are without [our partnerships]. They are key components to the overall success of the program.

— Liberty Elementary social worker

Teacher support	Student support	Family support
Assist in basic tasks such as making copies		
Model pedagogical techniques and strategies		
Provide behavioral support		
Support differentiation or personalization		
Offer academic enrichment		
Mentor students		
Offer professional services such as social work or counseling		
Support community outreach		
	Support students in play	
	Support healthy lifestyles	
	Provide service opportunities for students	
		Provide support for parents (examples: GED program, parenting class)

What knowledge, skills and dispositions do effective community educators need?

Focus group participants discussed knowledge, skills and dispositions of effective community educators. They described two types of knowledge: understanding curriculum and curricular strategies, and having particular types of expertise. Notably, if community educators are to help in the classroom with mentoring or academic support, it is particularly useful for them to understand curricular strategies used at the school. For example, community educators can be more effective if they reinforce the math or reading strategies classroom teachers promote.

Many of the skills teachers described as important to community educators centered on effective interactions with students. First, community educators need to understand the needs and abilities of different ages of students. They need to adapt approaches and vocabulary for the students with whom they are working. This can be particularly difficult if community educators work across grade levels; they need to adjust their practices for each age group. Second, community educators should be able to communicate well with students and build positive relationships. Third, if they will be teaching groups of students, they should be able to present in an interactive and engaging way. Other skills mentioned by research participants included exhibiting creativity and imagination, communicating well with faculty and being prepared, and supporting students appropriately, including setting clear boundaries.

Finally, research participants mentioned dispositions of ideal community educators. Dispositions centered on the ability to adapt to new situations, remain committed and reliant in the face of challenges, and show enthusiasm and positivity.

Knowledge

- Subject area
- District curriculum and state standards
- Curricular strategies
- Specialized expertise

Skills

- Understand learners of different ages
- Communicate well with students
- Build relationships with students
- Teach in an interactive and engaging way
- Exhibit creativity and imagination
- Communicate with faculty and be prepared
- Support students appropriately and set boundaries

Dispositions

- Open-minded, flexible and adaptable
- Committed, consistent and invested
- Confident and resilient
- Energetic, passionate and positive
- Caring, empathetic and patient
- Reflective

What are barriers to finding and collaborating with community educators?

Research participants listed several barriers they face when identifying and collaborating with volunteers and community educators. Although participants mostly described barriers related to parent volunteers, similar challenges might limit collaboration with other community educators.

Most prominent were processes for identifying community educators. Participants noted sometimes it is difficult to identify people or organizations who could help. In one case, a list of potential volunteers existed but did not include accurate contact information.

Another major barrier is the process for registering community educators. Focus group participants described struggling to get parents to complete the paperwork to volunteer. Although the process was brief (one estimate was 10 minutes), it was still a hurdle for volunteers. Parents often struggled to come to the school to complete the process.

Scheduling also made collaboration difficult. Many parents work during the school day and are not able to assist during school hours. It can be challenging to find community educators who can work with students on a consistent basis. For example, it is particularly difficult to identify individuals who can lead group projects during the school day across several weeks. Additionally, schools often needed to find physical space where community educators could work with students.

Finally, sometimes volunteers create additional work for teachers. Teachers described needing to dedicate time to orient and train volunteers, particularly for those working with younger students. A kindergarten teacher noted that she does not invite volunteers into the classroom during the first month of school when she is establishing classroom rules and procedures. Other teachers mentioned that volunteers often did not know how to ask effective questions that support student learning — sometimes volunteers tell students answers instead of guiding their thinking.

Barriers to collaborating with community educators

- Identifying available people and organizations

- Communication (including having accurate contact information for volunteers)

- Paperwork process

- Scheduling school visits (difficult for many parents to volunteer during school hours)

- Physical space for activities

- Community educators need additional knowledge and skills to be successful

What policies and practices support community educators?

Despite the barriers, focus group participants have still been able to collaborate with many volunteers and organizations. Participants described what policies and practices have supported — and would support — the identification and use of community educators.

First, participants stated adequate funding provides a strong foundation for supporting community educators and partnerships. For example, the principal of West Valley Middle School described a grant that will support new social workers next year. Additionally, discretionary funds provide flexibility for administrators to select community educators who offer the types of expertise needed in their school.

Participants also mentioned the need for systemic support for identifying and training community educators. For example, a School Cafe helped West Valley Middle School

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Liberty Elementary: Creating a culture of collaboration

The faculty of Liberty Elementary School established a culture of partnerships that can support their students and families. The principal explained that Liberty students have many needs that go well beyond discipline or academics. Partners such as Head Start, New Leaf domestic violence shelter, Make Way for Books, Bayless Mental Health and local churches provide ongoing support to meet the varied needs of students and families. And partners aren't just guests who offer isolated services to the school — they meet weekly to identify challenges, brainstorm solutions and coordinate responses. The school social worker explained that at the weekly meetings:

> We can discuss the students. We can discuss the families. Maybe we need to brainstorm. Maybe one organization is having difficulty getting hold of the family, and let's come up with ideas. What are we seeing and how can we all come together?

Key to these collaborations is regular communication and a shared focus on serving children and families. The principal stressed the importance of working with organizations that are passionate and that focus on students and families. This mindset allows them to push through obstacles and find creative solutions to challenges.

Liberty's partnerships are so strong that they have continued despite COVID-19 school closures. According to the principal, about 20 participants continue to meet weekly online, working together to find solutions to new challenges. With a strong support network already in place, Liberty has been able to continue to address the diverse needs of children and families during the pandemic.

form partnerships with organizations. At Coyote Canyon, parents were encouraged to fill out a volunteer interest form at Back-to-School Night. The forms were then compiled into a directory that teachers could use to invite community educators into their classrooms. Systems for identifying and training community educators could streamline school efforts and encourage all district schools to engage in these practices.

> *People want to know that their voice is heard. People want to not only hear their voice, but also take action on whatever ideas they provide.*
>
> *— Liberty Elementary principal*

In addition to identifying community educators, schools and teachers need to orient community educators to the school and district. West Valley Middle School held several orientation sessions for firefighters volunteering as student mentors. Sessions focused on school policies and included a question and answer segment. A kindergarten teacher described holding workshops to help parents understand his teaching philosophy and strategies.

Finally, site culture can support ongoing partnerships with community educators and help them persist through challenges. One teacher at Coyote Canyon described how the school had established "a foundation that Coyote Canyon is part of the community and that parents feel comfortable coming to our school." The result was that they could "build that culture of people coming in and volunteering at our school." Liberty Elementary participants described a "culture of trust" in which community organizations work together to address challenges of students and families. The principal emphasized the importance of supporting collaborative problem-solving through regular communication.

Practices that support community educators

Funding
- Grants for specific types of community educators such as social workers
- Discretionary funds that allow principals to access specific expertise needed at a site level

Systemic support
- Recruitment events
- Directory of community educators
- Orientation and training

Site culture
- Common goals
- Community comfortable in schools
- Regular partnership meetings

Recommendations

Liberty Elementary, Coyote Canyon and West Valley Middle are accomplishing incredible work through collaborations with volunteers and organizations. This section includes three recommendations for building on their successes. First, West Valley District should create structures and processes for recruiting community educators, providing schools and teachers a streamlined process for connecting with community educators. Second, the district should create a clear process for registering and orienting community educators. This should focus on removing friction, such as offering paperwork online. Finally, educational materials, ideally in the form of on-demand online modules, would allow community educators to have a greater impact on the students and families of West Valley. Each recommendation is described in more depth below.

Barrier	What has helped	Recommendation
Hard to identify potential community educators (organizations and individuals)	- Organized recruitment events (School Cafe) - Volunteer forms distributed at back-to-school night - School culture that welcomes community organizations	Establish processes and systems for identifying community educators.
Difficult registration and orientation process	- Group orientation sessions - School-level list of individuals approved for work in schools	Create a clear and simple process for registering community educators and orienting them to the school/district context.
Community educators come with variable levels of knowledge and skills, and dispositions	- Community educators who come on a consistent schedule (become a regular part of the school or classroom) - Regular meetings with community organizations to align purposes and goals	Offer ongoing training for community educators

1 Establish processes and systems for identifying community educators

- Hold events that facilitate recruitment of community educators. The district should work with schools to determine whether recruitment events are best held at the district or school level.

- Create a district-level directory of community educators that is accessible to all schools and teachers. Include details about each community educator and organization such as:

  - Skills and expertise
  - Preference for school site, tasks and age levels
  - Schedule and availability
  - Up-to-date contact information
  - Paperwork and training status

- Provide schools and teachers with other resources that can help them connect with community educators (for example, School Connect, Community Share and Nepris).

- Hold regular district meetings with community educators and supporting organizations. Such meetings provide opportunities to align goals, collaborate and problem solve. Schools should also be encouraged to meet regularly with community educators.

2 Create a clear and simple process for registering community educators and orienting them to the school/district context

- Focus on removing friction that occurs between the desire to be a community educator and fulfilling the requirements to begin working in schools.

- Clarify policies and procedures for volunteer registration and fingerprinting, including who does and does not need to complete background checks.

- Register community educators at back-to-school night or other events and complete as much paperwork as possible at the event. For example, schools might be prepared to copy ID cards during the event so community educators do not have to return to the school to do so.

- Offer online registration for community educators.

- Offer standardized orientation modules for community educators. These might take the form of on-demand online training (videos, modules) or regular orientation sessions. Initial training should include:

  - District policies

  - Guidance for what to do in difficult situations such as if a student requests out-of-school communication

  - Tips for being an effective community educator with an emphasis on communicating with faculty and staff and tailoring support for age levels

  - Collection of resources to possibly include curriculum standards and strategies, resources for reviewing content knowledge, and articles or books about teaching and learning.

Building a stronger relationship with our community is definitely a bridge to also addressing our school goals, what it is that we want to achieve with our students, whether that be academically or emotionally or behaviorally.

— West Valley Middle teacher

3 Provide ongoing training for community educators through on-demand online modules

- All community educators should receive training on:
  - The importance of consistent and positive relationships in children's lives
  - Understanding child development and working with specific age level groups
  - Resilience and reflective practice, including guidance for processing difficult situations in effective ways and developing individual expertise
- Community educators who provide academic support such as classroom instruction or mentoring should also receive training on:
  - Small-group engagement strategies
  - Elementary reading and math strategies
  - Mentoring through effective questions
  - Resources for community educator academic skill development (example: Khan Academy)

Conclusion

West Valley is well on its way to leveraging community educators to support students and teachers throughout the district. Liberty Elementary, Coyote Canyon and West Valley Middle are incorporating volunteers and community organizations to support students and families. Additional attention to the recruitment, registration and training of community educators will amplify what these schools are doing and support a network of community educators that can enrich learning across the district.

Resources

Nonprofit organizations

- American Heart Association school programs
- Arizona Autism United
- Green Team (through Local First Arizona)
- Heart for the City non-profit program for at-risk youth; programs include sports, community garden, Java Grounds work development center
- Make Way for Books early literacy development for teachers and families
- National Center for Families Learning multiple generation literacy strategies, programming, and resources for families
- A New Leaf crisis and family services; provides services for behavioral health, housing/shelter, domestic violence victims, foster care, education (early childhood, after school programs, adult education), financial education, family support,
- Read Better Be Better after-school reading comprehension program, pairs middle school students with third grade students to increase reading comprehension
- United Way: Valley of the Sun (Phoenix area), Mesa United Way, education programs

Arts programs

- Childplay AZ theatre program (school programs)
- Desert Edge Choirs
- Young Rembrandts drawing lessons; SE Phoenix branch works with Maricopa County schools and offers visiting field trips

Church groups

- Catholic Charities, North Star Youth Partnership (education, sports, leadership, service learning)
- Palm Valley Church
- River City Church

Public service workers

- Phoenix Firefighters, Phoenix Fire Foundation programs
- Luke Air Force Base

Local universities and colleges

- Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
- School of Social Work, Arizona State University
- Estrella Mountain Community College

Physical and emotional health specialists

- Bayless Integral Health
- Southwest Behavioral Health (school programs)
- Mountain Park Health