

## **Building Healthy and Sustainable Communities for Youth: Life Skills, School Libraries, and Social Involvement**

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### **Abstract**

*Healthy communities are based on social justice and mutual respect. Healthy communities for youth promote values such as fairness, equal treatment, accountability, opportunity, participation, and opportunities to make choices. This paper is based on definitions and activities from the U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development (1993-1999). School librarians serve communities when they develop venues ensuring the development of social values and personal life skills for youth. Workable suggestions, including reading programs, for a variety of school situations are provided. Case reports are offered illustrating how school librarians can develop life skills for youth as active community social agents.*

**Keywords:** Community, life-skills, librarians, social-agents, case studies

### **Introduction**

Strong communities improve the lives of students and enhance their life skills. Life skills lead to long-term success. Strong communities give youth a sense of empowerment and self-worth. Schools and the school library play important roles in developing life skills and building supportive communities.

Our definition of a healthy and sustainable community comes from the U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development. The Council's concepts are significant in that they outline what a strong community implies. In doing this, it suggests many roles school libraries can play in community development.

The Council states that a healthy community is based on social justice and mutual respect. A healthy community for youth promotes values such as fairness, equal treatment, accountability, opportunity, participation, and opportunities to make choices. It further states that:

Sustainable communities are those communities which support the dignity of families and individuals and in which the quality of life is renewed and enhanced within the context of responsible environmental practice through collective decision-making and action. Sustainable communities depend upon the existence of a social infrastructure which provides for the basic needs of shelter, jobs/income, health, education, and social support (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007, pp. 9-10, citing "Preliminary definition by working group of the President's Council on Sustainable Development).

Schools contribute to a community's social infrastructure in that they provide for education and social support and learning. School librarians become community workers as they develop venues that ensure and foster community values, and personal life skills. A healthy community provides continuous learning and educational opportunities.

### ***All Youth Today Are at Risk***

Most youth in all societies face challenges that arise from the structure of culture and society. These challenges often involve the conflict between individualism and group identity, and the rising expectations for youth to succeed within competitive societies.

Youth are also influenced by our modern celebrity culture and social media. These influences often affect how youth form values and behaviors. Likewise, in many countries we find the role of institutions in flux with changing roles for schools, government, religion, and the family.

Some examples of how schools and their libraries can address these issues are numerous. Information plays a key factor in what school libraries can do. Information needs of youth include:

- Basic health care;
- Community resources and how to develop access to community resources;
- Social and cultural issues;
- Conflicts and conflict resolutions;
- Safety issues;
- Violence, including bullying and other forms of harassment.

Youth receive conflicting messages from many quarters of society. Conflicts that raise questions about what is right, what is wrong, and does it really matter? Increasing availability of choices bring forth more conflicts. Youth may face choices of lifestyles, sexuality, drugs, recreations, and associations. Competition concerning values also place youth at risk.

Community traditions, family codes, and both secular and religious demands often conflict with the individual and his or her desires. The overall structure of society such as the demands for individualism and group identity can dissociate youth from their society. Rising expectations for youth in all cultures for success often brings conflicts and unhealthy competition. Another issue that youths face is that the role of major institutions in many countries are changing and in flux. In western societies especially this includes the family, schools, governments, and religions.

What can we do to help youth through the school library? We would like to discuss a few strategies that experts tell us can help in bringing about positive changes in communities.

### **Positive Strategies: Social Marketing**

School libraries have always marketed their services in many ways. We may have used the "public relations," or "promoting the library"; but essentially we were using "social marketing techniques." Social marketing as a concept or practice was developed in the 1970s as a method to promote positive changes in society and to reinforce existing positive behaviors for social good and advancement (Kolter & Lee 2008; Weinreich, 1999; Zaltman, Kolter & Kaufman, 1972).

Techniques for social marketing are those pioneered by commercial marketing. Although social marketing draws upon commercial strategies, its primary goals are to promote the social good.

Governments and associations are often involved in social marketing campaigns. Even before the 1970s, social marketing campaigns often involved public policies such as health, safety, good citizenship, and responsibility.

A current campaign by the United States Health Department is aimed at informing women about the need for periodic health examinations especially concerning cancer. Such

marketing approaches are theoretically encased in well-conceived educational and public information programs and management.



Figure 1: Social Marketing by the U.S. Government to Reduce Tobacco Use among Native Americans. Courtesy of the U.S. Government

Positive behavior and attitude change is essential in social marketing. Social marketing is based on these responses patterns: **AIDA**.

Attention.	Gaining attention;
Interest.	Promoting interest;
Desire.	Creating desire;
Action.	Taking action.

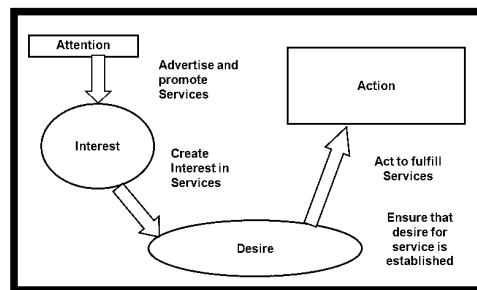


Figure 2: The AIDA Model and Its Attributes

Social Marketing need not be done alone by schools or libraries. Communities can help. In preparing a social marketing campaign, ask these questions about how the community-at-large can assist:

Institutions and Established Groups. What institutions in the community can be contracted to offer support to youths in school?

Persons of Respect. What individuals can be encouraged to advocate for and support youth?

Ideas. How can the community contribute ideas for supporting---how can these ideas be “packaged”?

Programs. What special and/or unique programs are offered or can be offered by youth organizations in the community?

Locations and Special Places. Are there locations in the community that seem especially suited for community resources centers for youth?

(Donovan & Henley, 2010; Weinreich 1999).

## Case Study 1. "Teacher-School Library Media Specialists Collaboration through Social Marketing Strategies: An Information Behavior Study."

This is a study that we conducted to test principles of social marketing when applied within several school environments. The major objective of our study was to understand the social and professional dynamics that occur when social marketing principles are used to promote change. Our basic design used graduate students who were enrolled in a practicum course required for state certification as school librarians. They were instructed to conduct social marketing campaigns to engage teachers in collaboration projects. These students were qualified as they were already certified teachers and were near the end their studies for the master's degree in school librarianship.

Our study showed that when social marketing concepts are introduced into a school environment they must conform to traditional forms of communication within the individual school. Social marketing ideas must have clear appeal to the faculty in terms of their teaching responsibilities and time. Social marketing campaigns are most likely to succeed in schools where there is trust between teachers and their teacher-librarian. A clear understanding of both teachers and teacher-librarians of the boundaries that affect collaboration must be established. The AIDA model discussed previously worked well in our experiment

Our findings go well beyond teacher-librarian and teacher collaboration. It showed that the guiding principles of social marketing can be applied to situations where teacher-librarians hope to reach out encourage cooperation in building healthy community identity within the school and its environs (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007).

### **Positive Strategies: Change and Assessment of Needs**

To change or modify a program, often a change strategy is necessary. Community assessment of needs is generally necessary before change can happen. This includes knowing the demographics and needs of the community and the school. Known needs are certainly included, but sometime there are needs that are not readily apparent that can be discovered through assessments.

An evaluation of the environment is a major part of assessment of needs. Psychologist Kurt Lewin developed the "Force-Field Analysis" model that can help us as we assess needs as well as how to bring about changes to meet needs (Lewin, 2006).

Force Field Analysis consists of two forces—positive forces and negative forces (Lewin). The use of this model encourages use to clearly identify these forces and the power that they can exert. We can ask:

- What are the driving forces for positive change?
- Can we estimate in numerical terms the power of these forces?
- What are the driving forces against positive change?
- Can we estimate in numerical terms the power of these forces?
- Based on our assessments, what would seem to be our best approach to bringing about change? What leverage do we have?

The following illustration shows a visual concept of a force field analysis:

◀Positive

Negative ▶

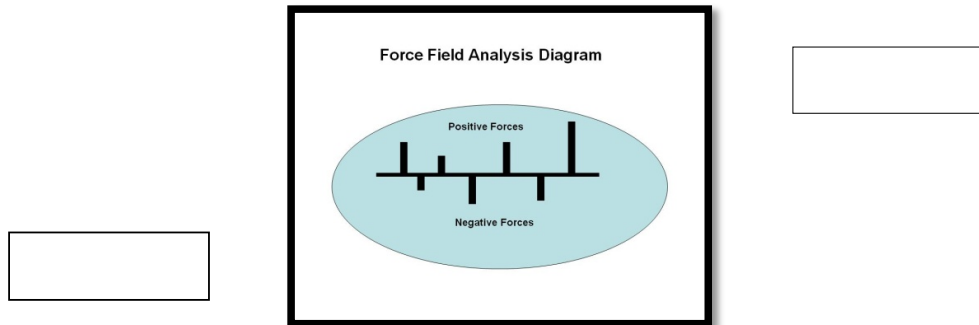


Figure 3: Force Field Analysis Showing Positive and Negative Forces

Conventional wisdom tells us to identify the strong support elements in the analysis and concentrate our efforts on using these to our advantage; and giving less attention to the negative forces. In other words, we are more likely to succeed when we 'concentrate on the positive, and eliminate the negative' as the song says.

The positive forces are easier to identify in most situations. It is the negative forces that are the ones we need to acknowledge. Depending on the situation these can include:

- Lack of administrative support;
- Lack of knowledge about making positive changes;
- Conservative viewpoints about education that favors academics over life-skills and adjustments;
- Perceived lack of staff time and interest in bring about change;
- Control of information
- Lack of community support and understand of proposed programs and activities.

Administrative support is crucial to this type of change and programming. Teacher-librarians can advocate that a library program designed to enhance the life skills of students serves in specific, observable, and measureable ways that reflect the known goals, objectives, and values of the school and the community.

#### Case Study 2. Reaching Out to the Community: The Austin History Center Experience.

Although this case study does not involve school libraries, but it does illustrate how force-field analysis can be applied. The Center faced long-time problems of connecting with the minority community. This was due to the historical discrimination that the city had traditionally shown to minorities. This hostility was clearly displayed by a 1928 city plan to keep the city segregated; minority populations were to be confined to one section of the city (Greenberger, 1997; Koch & Fowler, 1928).

Times have changed, and the Center needed to connect with the minority community. From this study, we noted that these are some elements that can be placed into a force-field analysis model similar to what might be faced in school library situation.

#### Positive:

- City government adopts positive initiatives to improve relationship with the minority community;
- Center's administrative staff understands the situation and is willing to engage in building relationships;
- Financial support available from city government to hire minority staff to reach out to the minority community;
- New programs and services developed that focused on the minority community;

A well-educated, integrated, and informed minority leadership in existence.

Negative:

Continuing resentment from minority community;

Separatist ideology exists among some leaders;

Misunderstanding among minority communities about the purpose of archives  
(e.g., lacking of understanding time frame for processing items);

Fear of losing control of artifacts;

Other “more important” pressing issues exist in the community.

***Enhancing Personal Opportunities and Attributes***

Creating a viable, sustainable community for youth is not easy. It requires much of us. Can we as individuals and groups face the challenges and be energized enough to bring about change? We need energy, emotional support, and commitment. One way to test our attributes for this is to do a personal and/or group assessment. Evaluate the situation at hand. Assess personal and group attributes: skills, resources, and challenges. Some guidelines (Seibel, 1974):

Set objectives. Focus on the immediate; be realistic; make them obtainable; rank them by priority;

Cultivate drive. Personalize desire; consider reasons for goals; place less emphasis on the intellectual and analytical aspects and more on the drive for accomplishment; become assertive, not aggressive;

Use Leverage. Concentrate efforts where they will be most effective; ask the right questions at the right time; question to uncover dangerous assumptions; communicate ideas effectively; work well with others; cultivate group activities.

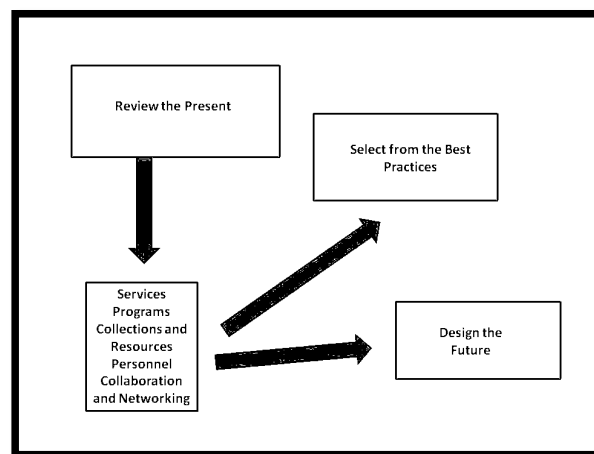


Figure 4: A Design for Action

***Life Skill: Empowerment, and dignity of families and individuals***

Life Skills involve many dynamics in a young person's life. Academics are a necessary skill, but skills go far beyond these. Figure 5 illustrates some of these relationships.

Book and periodical collection;  
 Electronic information;  
 Life Skills and Community information;  
 Information files (careers, etc.);  
 Directories and guides,  
 Free handout materials.

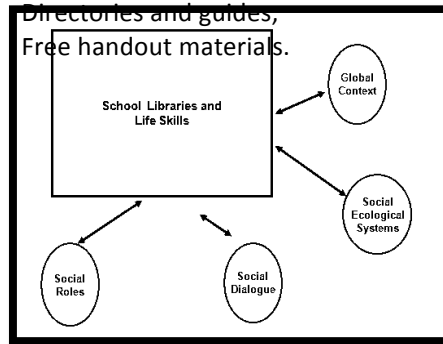


Figure 5. School Libraries and the Range of Life Skills

Providing life-skill information resources. Access to information for families and individuals, including community information, is one of the important responsibilities of government. This includes school libraries. Because of electronic transmission and the Internet, information is now more abundant and includes more variety than ever before. Much of this information is helpful to family life and the life of the individual. Information in school libraries now involves traditional collection including information that affirms both families and individuals. Collections also include community information. Interagency cooperation, networking and sharing enhances the availability of community information.

The illustrations that follow show the relationship of the school library, life skills, and community information. These illustrations indicate various ways that life skill information can be delivered.



Figure 6: A School-Based Life Skills Information Center

In providing life skills, librarians can use traditional means of building book and paper collections. We can also provide more elaborate systems including electronic information. We can post information on simple community information bulletin boards. Community directories are useful to have. Give-away items produced by both schools and community sources are likewise useful. Collecting and distributing this information must conform to a well-designed collection policy that governs overall selection of materials.

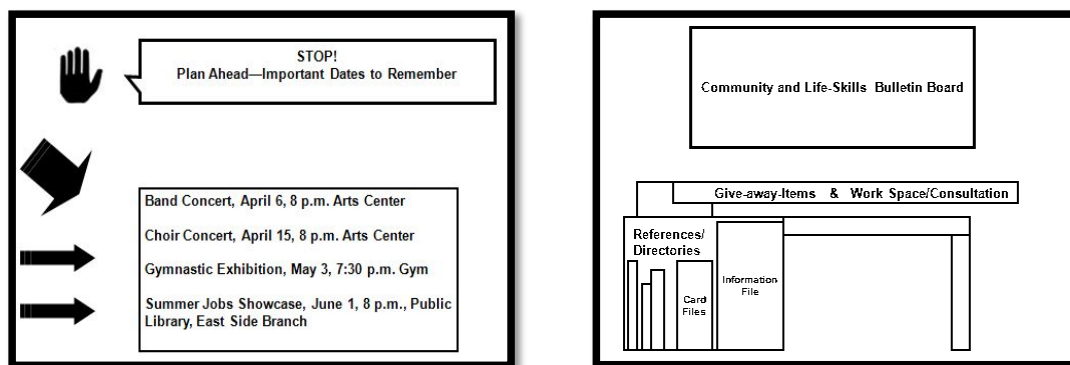


Figure 7: Simplified Life Skills Displays

**Life Skills: Conflict resolution.** Social and cultural issues and conflicts are a part of community life. Building a safe and sustainable community often require interventions in conflicts. This often occurs at the school level. There are curricula that address conflicts.

Critical analysis focused on conflicts can often be mediated through reading and discussion. Reading theories Louis Rosenblatt proposed that reading is not static. Reading involves the reader in the reading process by bringing the author and his or her own background, to the text, together with the reader's ideological and social backgrounds in an interactive dialogue (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Research have shown that class room reading as well as organized book clubs and discussion groups can introduce students to new ways of understanding themselves and others (Immroth & Lukenbill, 2013). Violent conduct, bullying, and other forms of harassment seem appropriate for such reading and discussion intervention. One aspect in such discussion can be one's responsibility to intervene when bullying and harassment are observed in the school.

**Life Skills: Safety for youth.** One of the paramount conditions for health and sustainable community is safety for youth. Safety includes not only how individuals provide for their own safety, but also how school and government policies promote safety. Safety curricula are available in most countries. Among the safety issues facing youth today are pedestrian rights and conditions; bicycle, motor bike, and driving safety; hunting and guns; and swimming and water safety (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007, pp. 92-94).

Libraries, both schools and public, often introduce first-responders such as medical and safety experts to youth through classroom and library visits. This allows students to see responsible men and women who will protect them and provide for their safety. Such presentations can also offer positive role models and behavior guidance for youth.

### **Life Skills: Quality of life**

**Providing a good life for youth.** Ensuring that our youth enjoy a comfortable life is our responsibility. This includes caring for the environment, and ensuring that all of us show responsibility for the environment, and that we are accountable for our actions toward the environment.





Figure 8: Environmental Awareness and Responsibility

Quality of life goes beyond the physical environment and includes recreation and positive leisure time pursuits. We all know that youth sometime push the limits on what is considered fun and challenging. The mass media through their celebration of extreme sports often exacerbates this. Enhancing quality of life provides opportunities for youth to make decisions and choices. Students through various means can be encouraged to make decisions regarding a number of themes. Including (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007, pp. 165-190):

- Food and water security;
- Land clearance and deforestation;
- Population displacement and movements;
- Intellectual (legal) property rights;
- Communications and the rightly use of the Internet
- Automobile culture and its effects on communities
- Access to legal rights, protection, and justice;
- Job security and society;
- Business ethics and responsibilities in society.

Psychologists and sociologists tell us that we as adults must provide positive outlets for the abounding energy of youth. Some school libraries offer venues for this. One school we know features musical performances by students at lunch time. This library also offers free German lessons to students taught by the lead teacher-librarian. School librarians can encourage youth to serve their communities by developing and offering volunteer programs and outreach services in their communities for youth.

Most youth enjoy competition. Public as well as school libraries can provide ways to offer healthy competition through games and other types of contests. This often includes reading programs where everyone can win a prize.

Programs that teach empathy and caring are especially needed. School and public libraries have used animals as excellent venues for this.



Figure 9: School-Based Program for Handicapped Children.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Community leaders and agencies can be invited to share information about their activities available to youth. These often includes folk and performance dancing, music, acting lessons, first-aid training, and other activities that support the individual as well as promoting a sustainable community.



Figure 10: Access to and Opportunities for Cultural Activities Enhances Community Sustainability. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

### **Social Infrastructures**

Health. Good health is a fundamental social issue. Health management is generally considered a responsibility of everyone, including governments and organizations. As society becomes more complex and diversified, problems associated with providing adequate health care to youth and citizens at all levels of society energize both humanitarian and political issues. The options that governments take range from providing total health care to governments that provide none. These options are often based on philosophical theories about the role of governments in society as well as how health care costs are to be managed.

The U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) has identified several issues and strategies to help promote health information through public libraries, and with some adjustments these can be used in school libraries. These include (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007, pp.91-92):

- Providing bookmarks and brochures about health issues;
- Holding storytimes for young children and discussion/reading groups for older youth with common topics on community health issues;
- Providing computer/Internet training with a health focus;
- Conduct classes/discussion of wellness (using community support personnel);
- Enhance library and/or community websites with health information and programs;
- Offer information on health support in the community;
- Work with the school nurse [when available] on programming topics and support;
- Alert faculty, staff, and parents about health information available in the library and community.



Figure 11: Healthy Food at School Promotes Good Health in the Community. Courtesy of the U. S. Government

Outreach to the Community. Outreach is another means of promoting health within a sustainable community. This is often conducted by community agencies and organizations, but schools can do this, too.

### Case Study 3. School Community Outreach: The Rio Grande Valley of Texas

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas lies just across the border from Mexico. The area has a large Hispanic population, many of who are poor and speak little or no English. Education levels are low and poverty is high. Because jobs are critical to the area, the South Texas Independent School District established the open-enrollment South Texas High School for Health Professionals (Med High). The library plays a large role in training these students for their careers, necessary school subjects, and to support the overall curriculum. The library provides instruction to students in how to use medical information systems such as MedLine. In addition, the library is involved in the school's outreach program where students take their skills out into the community to provide basic health information and demonstrations (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007).



Figure 12: Med High Students Bringing Health Information to the Community  
Courtesy of the South Texas Independent School District

Social Support. What are the unmet social needs of youth in communities? Schools, including their library programs can help identify unmet needs by holding open meetings with parents of other care givers to discover and discuss what these needs are and set agendas to address these needs.

Shelter. Homelessness is a problem in many places today. Perhaps schools and library programs cannot offer immediate solutions to homelessness in society. What we can do is help youth understand the issues that often create homelessness and help them build empathy for those who are homeless. For youth that are homeless, we can build strategies to protect homeless youth from humiliation. The teacher-library can help with these problems through selection of materials and with reading and discussion groups held under the auspices of the library.

Jobs and income. Good paying jobs are essential for a sustainable community. Access to jobs and careers often rely on having access to reliable information. This information is now readily available electronically as well as in print. Often youth need assistance in knowing how to find, critically appraise, and use this information. Besides the appropriate and critical use of information, useful guidance includes such basic matters as how to:

- Fill out an application;
- Present oneself to a potential employer;
- Assess one's skills for a particular job or career.

Many formal curricula address these issues. One popular way is for the school to host a career day, which is focused on helping young people learn about their career possibilities. In most United States schools, this occurs in middle school (ages 12-14). The usual format is to invite various persons from the community who hold specific jobs to come to the school and talk directly to students about what they do. This is a natural format for teacher-

librarians in schools to be involved in the planning and execution of career experiences. Public libraries often offer similar types of career programs, and school librarians can network with public libraries and other agencies to promote job and career awareness.

### **Evaluation for Success: Outcome Assessment**

Funders and others responsible for programs want to see results that give clear indication that a program impacts and changes in positive ways the behavior and attitudes for those that the programs are designed to help and influence. In 1996 The United Way of America issued *Measuring Programs Outcome: A Practical Approach*. This is helpful. The United Way states that impact (and outcomes) can be measured in several ways (Lukenbill & Immroth, 2007, pp. 9, 11, 116-117, citing United Way of America, 1996a):

- Observations made by and recorded by the staff (percent);
- Recorded Teacher comments (percent);
- Recorded student comments (percent);
- Parents and staff comments (percent);
- Test and other performance indicators as available;
- Description of activities and their assessed impact;
- Surveys of participants (staff, faculty, students, parents);
- Counts of materials used;
- Descriptions of materials used and/or produced and their instructional objectives;
- Evaluation of staff performance (self and administrative review).

The United Way also published a training kit or guide to help implement this impact evaluation strategy (1996b).

Design an "Outcome Measurement Framework" prior to the actual implementation of the program. Include in this the objectives of the program: outcomes expected; indicators of outcomes to measure; data sources; and data and collection methods. Comparisons can also be made with existing programs and with the new programs (as appropriate) (Lukenbill, 2004, pp. 59-91, citing United Way of America). Durrance, Fisher, and Hinton (2005) discussed how these impact measures can be applied within library environments. Dresang, Gross, and Holt's book (2006) is especially useful for teacher-librarians in the planning and evaluation of youth services and programs.

### **Conclusion and Reflections**

Sustainable communities require many elements in society and culture to work together. Schools have a social mission to prepare youth for adult life. This encompasses not only responsibilities for their own lives, but responsibilities for their communities. Schools and their libraries can play a major part in this important task.

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