

## **Re-functioning:**

### **A New Community Development Strategy for the Future**

John McKnight

Co-Director, Asset-Based Community Development Institute

Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation

Jamie Vollmer has written a landmark book titled, *Schools Cannot Do It Alone* (Enlightenment Press, 2010). In his book, he has documented the following new functions that have been undertaken by public schools since 1900:

From **1900 to 1910**, we shifted to our public schools responsibilities related to:

- Nutrition
- Immunization
- Health (Activities in the health arena multiply every year.)

From **1910-1930**, we added:

- Physical education (including organized athletics)
- The Practical Arts/Domestic Science/Home economics (including sewing and cooking)
- Vocational education (including industrial agricultural education)
- Mandated school transportation

In the **1940's**, we added:

- Business education (including typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping)
- Art and music
- Speech and drama
- Half-day kindergarten
- School lunch programs (We take this for granted today, but it was a huge step to shift to the schools the job of feeding America's children one third of their daily meals.)

In the **1950's**, we added:

- Expanded science and math education
- Safety education
- Driver's education
- Expanded music and art education
- Stronger foreign language requirements
- Sex education (Topics continue to escalate.)

In the **1960's**, we added:

- Advanced Placement programs
- Head Start
- Title I
- Adult education
- Consumer education (resources, rights and responsibilities)
- Career education (options and entry level skill requirements)
- Peace, leisure, and recreation education [Loved those sixties.]

In the **1970's**, the breakup of the American family accelerated, and we added:

- Drug and alcohol abuse education
- Parenting education (techniques and tools for healthy parenting)
- Behavior adjustment classes (including classroom and communication skills)
- Character education
- Special education (mandated by federal government)
- Title IX programs (greatly expanded athletic programs for girls)
- Environmental education
- Women's studies
- African-American heritage education
- School breakfast programs (Now some schools feed America's children two-thirds of their daily meals throughout the school year and all summer. Sadly, these are the only decent meals some children receive.)

In the **1980's** the floodgates opened, and we added:

- Keyboarding and computer education
- Global education
- Multicultural/Ethnic education
- Nonsexist education
- English-as-a-second- language and bilingual education
- Teen pregnancy awareness
- Hispanic heritage education
- Early childhood education
- Jump Start, Early Start, Even Start, and Prime Start
- Full-day kindergarten
- Preschool programs for children at risk
- After-school programs for children of working parents
- Alternative education in all its forms
- Stranger/danger education
- Antismoking education
- Sexual abuse prevention education
- Expanded health and psychological services
- Child abuse monitoring (a legal requirement for all teachers)

In the **1990's**, we added:

- Conflict resolution and peer mediation
- HIV/AIDS education
- CPR training
- Death education
- America 2000 initiatives (Republican)
- Inclusion
- Expanded computer and internet education
- Distance learning
- Tech Prep and School to Work programs
- Technical Adequacy Assessment
- Post-secondary enrollment options
- Concurrent enrollment options
- Goals 2000 initiatives (Democrat)
- Expanded Talented and Gifted opportunities
- At risk and dropout prevention
- Homeless education (including causes and effects on children)
- Gang education (urban centers)
- Service learning
- Bus safety, bicycle safety, gun safety, and water safety education

In the **first decade of the twenty-first century**, we have added:

- No Child Left Behind (Republican)
- Bully prevention
- Anti-harassment policies (gender, race, religion, or national origin)
- Expanded early childcare and wrap around programs
- Elevator and escalator safety instruction
- Body Mass Index evaluation (obesity monitoring)
- Organ donor education and awareness programs
- Personal financial literacy
- Entrepreneurial and innovation skills development
- Media literacy development
- Contextual learning skill development
- Health and wellness programs
- Race to the Top (Democrat)

This research indicates that at least ninety-five new functions have been assumed by public schools and that the increase in these new functions has accelerated since the 1980's. Some of these functions are innovations that were created within school systems. However, most of them are functions that were once performed outside of the systems-especially in local communities.

This transfer of community functions to the schools has had two negative effects on schools. First, teachers have been asked to add topics to their pedagogy for which they have no training. Second, the growing number of new topics has burdened the classroom teacher with more responsibilities than can possibly be fulfilled. The result is often frustrated and overloaded teachers who have less and less time to teach the basic topics for which they were trained.

The transfer of community functions to the schools has also had two negative effects upon local communities. The first is that because the schools have been structurally unable to fulfill many of the functions once performed in the neighborhood, there have been an increasing number of unsolved neighborhood problems. Second, communities, neighborhoods and local residents have also lost the competence to collectively perform their essential functions. This lost knowledge of how a competent citizenry performs its unique community functions is displaced and paradoxically, citizens become frustrated because schools can't solve the problems that their own communities once resolved.

This transfer of community functions to institutions is not limited to the schools. Indeed, it is a phenomenon that has occurred in many other institutions.

For example, the responsibility and capacity to deal with neighborhood security has been transferred to police systems. Paradoxically, the superintendents of most major police departments now say that the "crime" problem cannot be solved without community engagement. In some cases, police departments have even created units that organize neighbors into "block watch" – a group of local residents relearning how they can use their collective power to be more secure.

While "block watch" is a commendable effort by police systems to transfer some of the security functions back to the local community, the overall trend is to invest in more police rather than more refunctioning of communities. As a result, in many cities neighborhood security has declined while police power has increased.

Almost all the leaders of the medical establishment agree that the primary source of good health is in the local community. They point to individual behavior, associational life, the physical environment and economic status as the major health determinants. However, they have no control over any of them because these determinants are largely the work of local communities. Nonetheless, many local residents now believe that the

medical care system is the primary source of health and that their wellbeing is primarily created in a hospital.

Local governments have professionalized, developing management skills while using more technology. As their capacities have grown, local residents have shifted from being productive local citizens to becoming advocates for the government to solve all their problems. In some local governments, there has been an effort to maximize citizen participation, but this activity largely culminates in new responsibilities and function for local government rather than re-functioning neighborhoods.

As the corporatization of food production and distribution has blossomed, the capacity to produce food locally has diminished. The once common backyard garden disappeared. Recently, a hopeful, burgeoning movement to produce local food has emerged across the nation creating the first bloom of a re-functioning of the source of nourishment.

This history of institutions assuming community functions is a major cause of community dysfunction. Its consequence is expressed in the growing isolation of neighbors, one from another. It is also expressed in the decline of local associational life that was documented by Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone*. Together, these two declines have dissolved the basic social fabric that is the primary resource for productive, functional civic engagement.

The functions where collective citizen productivity can reclaim neighbor well being and problem solving include:

1. Safety
2. Health
3. Enterprise
4. Food
5. Ecology
6. Children
7. Care (not service)

In redefining the functions of neighborhoods, these seven domains are the *development agenda* for the future. What collective, local citizen action can enhance these domains? What policies and action of institutions and funders can support, rather than displace, these productive citizen capacities?

In this new development strategy, it is important to recognize the secondary benefits. As new relationships develop locally in order to create a competent community, the neighbors are building a bank of social capital. They are also creating a culture supporting the presumption of citizen capacity rather than citizens being merely consumers of institutional outputs. Also, the relationships growing out of community work will often necessarily cross, dividing lines of age, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. And finally, this collective citizen productivity creates a new sense of efficacy and self-worth among the participating individuals.

While it takes a village to raise a child, our current dilemma is the lack of village. Therefore, the first step in creating a village is to relocate functions that have made so many neighborhoods powerless and unproductive.