

Building Community: An Instruction Manual

By Bill Farkas
Hilltown Cooperative Charter School

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Why I Am Writing This Paper

I've been in the field of education for over 28 years, and "building community" has always been one of my goals. As I reflect back upon my accomplishments, I see that I've had very varying degrees of success at meeting this goal.

In 2000 we considered sending our son to Hilltown Cooperative Charter School (H.C.C.S.), a K-8 arts-integrated, parent cooperative charter school utilizing conversation-guided curriculum and project-based learning. During my first several visits to the school, as a perspective parent, I felt welcomed well beyond what I've ever felt in any school or organization. When our son began attending Hilltown, in the fall of 2001, and when I joined the staff the following spring, as a K-1 teacher, I found this welcome to be anything but happenstance. There was explicit dialogue and action among the staff, creating a culture of welcoming, acceptance, and belonging. In short, at Hilltown the goal of "building community" is not just verbalized in a mission statement, it is something that the entire school community strives for, utilizing a number of well-developed structures.

This paper is my attempt to catalogue most of those structures. I address this paper to you, an educator (in the fullest sense of the term). I'm documenting the structures Hilltown has in place that help create community, so you can, if you wish, implement them incrementally at your school. Please remember, as I keep on reminding myself, that "community" is a *process*, something in flux, not a fixed "thing." At any point in time, it can be strong or weak, vague or

more clearly defined, but it cannot be made, stored, or preserved. As educators, we can only do our best to contribute to the formation of community, while many forces in America's larger culture are actively and intrusively focusing upon alienation and isolation. Our task isn't easy, but it is immensely important and rewarding.

Thank you for reading thus far. It is a hopeful sign that many people consider community building a primary goal and are motivated to learn how to promote it more effectively. As educators, we are not just the facilitators of community, but the "trainers of trainers." We send out students who as they find their ways through the world, will each do their part to create what they once experienced in our schools. If we do our part well, they will be the community builders of the future.

Why Work at Building Community?

People value community because it is the natural way that human beings have lived throughout their existence. The issue is not whether we build community. It's whether we offer an attractive alternative to the "community" available with characters on sitcoms, or in chat rooms on the Internet, or elsewhere. Everyone longs for community. We get it where we can find it, and if a suitable alternative is not offered, then pop culture is what we get!

As human beings, we are born into a relationship with a parent, parents, or guardian, who are in relationship with their friends, relatives, and neighbors. All of these people comprise for us a community of others who are (hopefully) interested in our growth and development. When we

begin school (as most of us do), we have a special opportunity. That transition is a time when our entire family can learn how to extend our network of personal relationships. We enter a sizable group of strangers who could eventually become the supportive body for our further growth. At Hilltown, our commitment is long term (as the school is K-8, a child can experience nine years of schooling in this one institution). We have time to get to know many individuals, through the numerous grades and occasions for becoming acquainted with others. Fund-raisers, volunteering, and field trips--these are all chances to know others and be known. How often in life does each of us encounter such a new set of possibilities?

Staff members at our school are activists who have a large vision of the role of schools, and specifically our school, in society. We “think globally and act locally.” We work to encourage the formation of supportive relationships, networks that create community and support the members of that community. The work we do draws upon positive elements of the past, before industrialization caused people to move to factory towns and leave extended family behind, before watching relationships on television became a substitute for having real relationships with a number of people. We know that human development involves social learning and brain development for an extended period *after* birth and that social learning occurs *in relationship* with parents or guardians and others in the extended family and community. We seek to build an environment specifically tailored to bring our natural proclivity for *connecting with others in community* to fruition. At Hilltown, we do this one person at a time and as a group. Our school’s culture and vision help us as staff to do our individual pieces autonomously, and at the same time, synchronize our collaboration.

The Instructions, Part I

You know that pesky little fellow, the clock on your VCR? Ever notice how we find time to complain about how hard it is to set, but we don't always make time to read the instructions on how to do it? It's the same with building community. Starting now, if it's community we want, we've got to *FIND AND READ SOME DIRECTIONS!*

Each year offers a new start. We can begin with all the structures, tools, techniques, and attitudes in place that will help us develop community. We can apply them and notice the results. If you're one of those people who files your appliance instruction sheets, or piles them into the kitchen "junk" drawer, stop right now! Make three copies of this paper. Take one home to read at night when things don't seem to be working as well as you hoped. Sleep well, and come back the next day ready to utilize yet another tool. Keep one copy pinned to your personal bulletin board in the classroom, where assistants, volunteers, and visitors can read it. Share the third copy with your colleagues, administrators, coordinators, etc., so you can all work from the same page. You will need to educate these individuals as to what is possible, so they can join you in building the structures and utilizing the tools and techniques that help build community school-wide.

Remember, people were designed to live in small clusters of 7-8 clan-mates. In a very real sense, we're all learning how to relate to larger groups. In addition, we may have grown up in families where the stress, isolation, and insufficient support our parents experienced have left us feeling alone, uncared for, and not deserving of more. The neighborhoods where we learned and

practiced social skills may have been ones where bullying and lack of supervision and guidance left us feeling unwelcome and spurned because of our own (perceived) inadequacies. It's likely that each of us brings such negative feelings, in varying degrees, to the groups of people that exist in our schools and workplaces. We may need to unlearn what lack of community feels like, so we can apply community-building techniques clearly, without our own baggage. In the process of building community, be patient with others and yourself!

The Instructions, Part II

We're almost to the "How to do it" part of this paper. Remember the old VCR metaphor? You can just pop in an existing tape if you want to see the same old things play out, again and again. To see what YOU wish to see, you've got to learn how to program it. Be careful about pushing buttons until you've done the pre-requisite learning and preparation. Remember, attitudes alone won't bring about the change you seek; structures, along with attitudes, tools and techniques, will!

If you build it (the structures for community-building), they will come (and form community).

So discuss these ideas with your colleagues, start small, and begin to phase in the work.

Phasing In Community-Building Structures and Activities

All life experiences have a beginning, middle, and an end; school year programs need to find ways to address these events. Think about how you will signify these transitions at your school.

Some are experienced individually, some in class or other groups, and some as an entire school community. Where do you start? With so many methods for building community, the task of implementation can seem overwhelming; so begin one step at a time, and work sequentially, as group development moves ahead in stages.

At Hilltown we have processes for building community at a variety of levels. To phase in community-building structures, you need to create a mixture of activities: for individuals, classes, special groups, and the whole school. The following table includes a sample of activities we utilize for the whole school population. You can fill in the blanks with a mixture of activities, from this paper and based on your own ideas!

Process:	Welcoming	Introducing	Sharing Values	Sharing Self	Ending/ Leaving
Individuals:					
Class:					
School (At All School):	Welcoming Ceremony	Birthday Celebrations	Leadership Roles	Il Teatro, Skits	Graduation Ceremony

For PHASE ONE, think about the structures you will use to assist **individuals** with transitions. If you are a new teacher, or new to a class or school, consider: How will you as a teacher help a child feel welcomed by you, become *introduced* to you? Will it be through home visits, visiting days, something else? How will you help each child begin to *share his or her values* with you? Will it be through talking together over lunch, writing activities, or goal setting conferences? In what ways will you create opportunities for the *sharing of self*? Will you do it through art, music, movement, or other activities? And how will you prepare each child for finding some degree of

closure with you at the end of the year? Will conferences, gifts, or other activities accomplish your goal?

Now as a returning teacher, you no doubt do many of these activities (activities that help individuals with transitions) every well. For PHASE TWO, consider how you will help bring **your class** through the transitions that naturally take place as groups develop. How will you, in the role of group facilitator, plan so that *changes are anticipated*, looked forward to, and taken in? What means will you use to help the class *process events* after they have happened? FRAMING events in a positive light and REFRAMING difficult ones (as challenges with meaning) are techniques that work well here.

If you are working with a special group (such as a chorus), in a mini-course, or with combined classes, apply the same thinking, planning, and facilitating.

For PHASE THREE, you will share with the **whole school population** the relationship and community-building activities that have worked well for you and your class. The lead-time needed to develop and initiate changes involving the whole school population is much greater. You will need to identify and enlist change agents to work with you. Rather than selling techniques and structures to others in your school, talk about the larger goal, of building community consciously. Involve others from the beginning.

Maybe this means that you and your colleagues take on facilitating a welcoming ceremony and some follow-through events. Keep your explanations simple: a welcoming ceremony and

periodic events at assembly help maintain the momentum of helping members of the school community get to know each other. Maybe you can get a five-minute slot at each assembly, or perhaps you can have a longer time segment in every other assembly. Maybe you can arrange to have a major segment at the first assembly of each month, designated as “Community Time.”

As with all change efforts, finding *planning time* is both challenging and essential. As you work to put in place the structures and practices that help build community, try to schedule *a social component*. Eat lunch with other staff that you have identified as committed to implementing community-building measures for the whole school. Try to do this once a week, perhaps late in the week; compare notes and map out next steps. Evaluate what you do in terms of the students’ interests and energy. Don’t be too critical, as both you and the group are learning. Participation may vary widely. Don’t assume that because initial efforts are viewed somewhat skeptically that all your efforts are doomed to fail.

At Hilltown our goal is to treat students, parents, and each other respectfully, as unique and talented individuals with strong capacities for learning. *Your goal* may be to counteract the effects of isolation and alienation in contemporary American society, or you may have another stated goal. You may need to introduce your ideas something like this: “Let’s conduct a few activities wherein people in our school can get to know each other better.” If you can be light and humorous with your facilitation of group events, you may find that individuals, classes, and the group culture will begin to gradually shift. Being “light and humorous” is important because this spirit is the antidote to fear (that there will be a backlash to our work), and to the seriousness of it all. Some days you just have to take a break, and go out there and have a little fun.

Students (and I think, all of us) are much more receptive to messages when they're not preached. *Catch me in play and I'll take in so much more.* You will know that you are having an effect on the norms of the group when you hear, "When are we going to have the next welcoming ceremony (or birthday celebration, or skit, or any number of community-building activities)?"

Building Community Throughout Your School

The following are structures and tools that can be put into place to help build community. Some are part of a school-year long process, not one-time events. They are clustered according to where and how they are used: at assembly (All-School), in class, between classes, and across grades.

At All-School

All-School is an assembly for the entire school community; it takes place each week (at least) all year. It's a place for sharing, announcing, recognizing, and coming together as a group. All-School helps people feel safe, included, and fully present in the school community. It also serves as a forum for issues around the school. Moreover, as everyone in the school community gets to know one another, ever more revealing sharing takes place. The structure of the event remains the same, however, fostering the sense of safety and providing ritual, even as content changes.

An individual coordinates All-School. If staff members wish to have their class do performances during All-School, we contact the coordinator in advance and make suggestions for scheduling,

time needed, etc. Often, classes of younger students are scheduled earlier in the program. The coordinator may announce at the week's staff meeting prior to All-School that the event will be longer, or shorter, due to the number or type of elements in it. The schedule might be as follows:

- Welcome: by this month's announcers
- "Jane" and "Jody" (two seventh graders) lead a song
- The 2nd/3rd grade class puts on a skit
- All school coordinator leads a song
- The 4th/5th grade class makes an announcement (about their fund-raiser)
- Closing song, which serves to dismiss one class at a time

All-Schools begin at 8:45 a.m. and last until approximately 9:30 a.m. Early in the school year, All-Schools are shorter, and as the routine becomes more second nature for participants, they are sometimes extended. If there is a play, or many skits, performances, or announcements, the coordinator may take All-School to an hour or occasionally, even 1-1/4 hours in length.

Our All-School generally takes place on Friday mornings, and all constituencies of the school are invited to attend. This means that bookkeepers, administrative assistants, nurses, art and music teachers, SPED staff, and of course, children, teachers, and parents are present. Many feel All-School is the highlight of the school week! Remember, events such as All-School build connections and a culture. It's hard to justify why anyone "wouldn't need to come."

Routine is extremely important in this whole-community event. Routine leads to predictability, which fosters feelings of safety, especially for the youngest children. It's easier to be ready

when one knows what is coming next. We sing familiar songs before introducing new ones, for example, and we celebrate birthdays in a ritualized way. Such actions build delightful expectation as folks anticipate the next “act” at All-School. Welcoming ceremonies, buddies, announcements, emcees, singing, birthday acknowledgments, skits, Il Teatro (sharing talents), mini-course sharing, and leaving ceremonies are all components of the weekly All-School gatherings, and are described below.

Welcoming Ceremony

The Welcoming Ceremony takes place the second day of school, to extend the “hand of friendship and inclusion” to each and every new person who joins the school. We save it for the second day of school, due to the concern that the youngest, new kindergarteners may be overwhelmed by the size and intensity of this group experience. There is a specific invitation to all parents, especially new ones, regardless of grade level, to come to the Welcoming Ceremony. The song below, the Welcome Song (written by Penny Schultz, Movement and Music Coordinator, and Deirdre Arthen, Community Coordinator in 1998, and used here with their permission) is sung with gusto, to a driving drummed beat, played by older students. We sing:

Welcome to our school, glad to met you yessiree

A new year has begun, full of possibility

We’ll have fun learning, playing, doing it together

(first name, last name) welcome with your family, clap--clapclapclap-----clap-clap-clap

Each and every newcomer receives the token gift of a feather with a bead attached. Like the precious pebble a child finds on the beach, these welcome mementos get cherished. Years later,

my son and I *both* still have the feathers we were given at the ceremony where we were welcomed!

All-School Buddies

For All-School, each student is teamed up with a “buddy,” a partner from another class. The younger students get older “buddies” to help them sit and focus for what may be a long All-School session for them. Typically, the oldest students are paired with the youngest students. Thus students in the fifth/sixth grade class are buddies to the K/1’s. The administrative coordinators match the classes. The classroom teachers assign students to each other, based upon what they know about each child’s needs and abilities. The shy kindergartener is matched with the patient, supportive 5th grader. The first grade boy who has difficulty sitting and focusing is matched with the older child who has also struggled with this and made a workable accommodation.

We attempt to support the younger child and bring out the best in the older child, benefiting both students. The older ones are put in a position to provide comfort and direction for the younger ones. Thus the students in the sixth grade build and develop a sense of their role as leaders and models for others. The pairings are rotated as the year progresses, so that by June, a student may have had four different buddies. We introduce buddies to each other during a classroom meeting and have a “farewell” party the last time buddies are together before a switch.

I have seen how the buddy relationship can really shift an older child's self-image. There was a boy who was expressing his ability to lead in his classroom by being disruptive and disrespectful to his teachers. I'll refer to him as "Pete." I teamed up Pete with a younger boy, "Jake," on a similar path in my class, and I coached Pete so that he understood how he was valued and respected by the younger boy, how he served as a role model. Pete came to see Jake adopt the leadership qualities he exhibited. Pete took on, and channeled his intelligence into, assignments that would better utilize his talents and proclivity to lead. It helped him that the attention was on the younger child--safely removed from him. Pete was able to appreciate my guidance without feeling personally confronted. This is not to say that the negative behaviors disappeared completely, but the primary role Pete chose for himself became the positive one, as older, more mature mentor. What's more, Jake became a significantly more cooperative and engaged student after this "buddying" experience.

Experiencing close bonds with a variety of mentors is a sure way to build connections one-by-one. These bonds may persist throughout the year and beyond, into the child's on-going school experience. See Appendix A for the story of how the buddy relationship helped one child transition into Hilltown.

Announcements

Each week, staff, teachers, students, and parents let the All-School Coordinator know of announcements they need to make. The person making the announcement stands in front of the "crowd." Theatrics are encouraged. Be it a bake sale, an invite to a classroom museum exhibit,

or an administrative/logistical announcement, these are often done with flair so as to keep the excitement and attention high.

Announcements are also an opportunity for students to build public speaking skills individually, or as a group. All-School is one of the primary means of communication in the school community, and we utilize the opportunity continuously. Brevity is also a norm! A typical All-School might include the following announcements:

Sarah: I will be performing a piano solo at the community music center, and would love to have all of you attend...

John: I am collecting for "Feed the Children." The box is in the parent corner. Please contribute by providing food for children in Afghanistan.

Mary: Reminder, we are collecting printer cartridges to recycle. This is to make money for our class trip. Please leave your cartridges...

All-School Coordinator: Please remember that it takes a lot of courage sometimes to get up here in front of people. We can help them feel more comfortable if we all do our best to listen very carefully, and not to talk, when others are up here.

Administrative Coordinator: It has been getting very busy in the parking lot during drop-off time, and I've seen several children about to get hit. Please walk straight to the school door, and remind your parents not to drive off until you get there.

Teacher: Mazy, our class mouse, needs a home during the coming school vacation. Please see me if you can help. Don't forget to ask your parents first. By the way, she has 14 babies that need a permanent new home...

Emcees

Who announces the “acts” at All-School? Each month, a different class has a turn. Again, helping to build public speaking skills. Emceeing also provides the opportunity for individual students to be known to the school. Standing up in front of everybody in all your quaking glory surely reveals a lot about who you are and how you handle the energy of stage fright! Teamwork is also built in, as classmates practice working together to make their cues in proper sequence. Announcing is part of doing real world activities. Students are aware that others depend upon them, creating a meaningful context for learning! See Appendix B for the story of students in my K/1 class, as they learn to serve as emcees.

Singing

The music/movement coordinator leads the whole group in singing at All-School. We are fortunate to have a person in this capacity who leads “community sings” in our area, with the express purpose of bring people together in song.

We begin the year teaching a basic vocabulary of songs. Each week, we sing old ones before new ones are taught. Some of the new material is first taught in individual class music lessons. Teachers then reinforce the learning in daily classroom meeting (described in *Daily Meeting*, in the section **Within Each Class**). School-wide singing is first experienced in All-School. Nothing brings people present and close like coming together in harmony.

Birthday Acknowledgments

Everybody has a birthday! And who doesn't go through the stress of it all: Who to invite? Will they want to come? Will my special day pass by unnoticed? By acknowledging each person's birthday at All-School, everyone gets to have his or her special day!

Part of the weekly routine is to ask, "Does anyone have a birthday this week?" (We include non-teaching staff and parents.) The people with birthdays that week come up and form a line, from youngest to oldest. Sometimes a person needs some "moral support" to get up in front of the group, so a classmate or teacher goes with them. Each person says his or her full name, date of birth, and how old they are. Then a basket, containing names of a variety of fun birthday songs, is offered for the youngest to choose from.

Skits

From time to time, classes or groups of individuals perform a skit. This may have evolved out of a classroom study, or it might have emerged from an idea of several playmates. What a fun way to see people you are coming to know show off different parts of their personality!

Il Teatro

There comes a time when people want to demonstrate a significant idea or talent. In other words, they have come to the point where they want to share more of themselves with the whole

group. Il Teatro is a quarterly event held during the time set aside for All-School. People are invited to sign up and audition to perform at it. Acts are screened for preparedness to go on stage, not according to artistic merit. It's not about talent alone--we embrace people for their sharing of spirit with us.

Sharing Through Mini-Courses

Mini-courses are brief courses (4 sessions) offered on Wednesday morning and led by staff and/or parents. They are described later in this paper (see *Mini-Courses* in the section, **Across Grades**). When, as a result of a mini-course, there is a product or performance to be shared, it happens at All-School. Here again, special talents and accomplishments are shared as part of a getting-to-know-each-other process at the school.

Leaving Ceremony

At the end of the year, and at any other time when there is a leaving, this, too, is observed at All-School. Giving such attention to leaving acknowledges the bonds that people form and allows for the beginning of some closure. A staff member's leaving is an especially bittersweet event for the school community.

The All-School, then, is the arena where people are noticed, welcomed, share of themselves, practice and hone their skills, and ultimately are wished well and sent on. It is a very personal gathering of the whole school community.

In Each Class

Of course, much building of community occurs on a daily basis in the classroom. Regular interactions with a limited group of peers form the cornerstone of acceptance in, and connection to, school.

Daily Meeting

Daily Meeting is a whole-class meeting that takes place in the classroom at least once daily; it's a venue for processing issues, sharing information, and revealing increasingly more of one's self with one's classmates. There are many names for meeting, such as "Circle" or "Classroom Council." Whatever you call it, think about it as a place to be known by others. "Show and Tell," is a key component of daily meeting. It's not mainly for the development of verbal skills, nor is it to help merchandise what appears on TV. It is an opportunity for students and staff to explain what is important to them, what we cherish. We have guidelines as to what can be brought in; it can be from nature or from travels to faraway places, thus reinforcing that, in our school community, we value living things and aspire to be global citizens. Family photos, drawings, and crafts people have made, all kinds of special items of interest, may also end up coming to meeting; brand-name accoutrements do not.

Multi-Age Groupings

At Hilltown, students are grouped in multi-age classrooms (K/1, 2/3, 4/5, etc.) Students benefit from the mentoring and consistency that multiple years with the same teacher afford. But having two or more grades together has strengths that go beyond the educational efficiency. It allows a culture to be passed to incoming/upcoming students, every day by peers. Living in community with others *is* a cultural value and set of skills; the attributes of “one who lives in community”--a proclivity to work in small groups, having a role (job) that contributes to the whole (communicator, includer, negotiator, decision-facilitator, conflict deescalater, conflict resolver, social facilitator, etc), collaborating, and thinking about the needs of others while also advocating for one’s own needs---can be modeled and taught by someone just a bit older, whom one emulates.

Between Classes

Sometimes special relationships are formed between two classes. Teachers often arrange to “buddy” with another class for purposes of academic and social enhancement. Often “buddying” of classrooms happens spontaneously. At Hilltown there is good and regular communication among staff, and threads of interest get noticed and shared. Buddying between classes tends to take the following forms: reading buddies, grade-level groupings, project-based learning collaborations, and sharing of resources, each described briefly below.

Reading Buddies

Everyone benefits from having someone to read to. But often in a class there are only one or two adults to a group of 16 or more students. To remedy the situation, students are paired with student buddies who listen to them read, or who read to them. These pairings get rotated as the year progresses. Throughout the school year, reading buddies in our class change four times, with each transition marked by a party for both classes involved. As reading buddies may develop very deep relationships (as Big Brother/Sister relationships), they are a great way to knit the fabric of community among students.

Grade Level Groupings

When there is more than one classroom per grade level, sharing lessons and events helps foster relationships among grade-mates. For example, we've done "first grade math" and "first grade choice" times together with the first graders in another class, each once a week. At Hilltown we feel it is important to foster friendships in the classroom, not just on the playground. I've found, however, that if I don't schedule collaborations into my weekly routine, they are not as likely to happen.

Project-Based Learning Collaborations

Sometimes we are studying something that another class is also studying, or a similar interest may emerge in two different classes. Maybe each class has students in it who notice an unusual

insect, attend the same circus performance, or are interested in ships, perhaps on different levels. We get together for videos, demonstrations, exhibitions, or what we call “each-one-teach-ones” (where each student in a class teaches a student from another class what they know, or shares a skill they possess). Our class collaborated with the 5/6 class during a project to make worm composting bins. The fifth and sixth graders showed us how to prepare our bin and then paired with us to sift through “night soil” to collect starter worms for our bin. Everyone had a good time!

Sharing Resources

If nothing else, perhaps another teacher has some resources stowed away--related to a whale watch, inclined planes, or whatever. Sometimes we learn the bookkeeper has a great hobby, like collecting butterflies. You don't know what resources your co-workers can bring to bear, if you don't share with them what you're doing in the classroom and if you don't talk with them about their interests. The culture at our school is one of collaboration among all staff, resulting in collaboration among classes.

Across Grades

Mini-Courses

As noted earlier, mini-courses are brief courses (four sessions), offered on Wednesday mornings and led by staff and/or parents. Students, from all classrooms and age levels, sign up for a mini-

course of their choosing (for example, jazz or modern dance, drama games, orienteering skills, science exploration, watercolor painting, poetry writing, fiber arts, singing at a nearby long-term care facility). A typical mini-course might have two students from each classroom in it, for a total of 10-15 students. Mini-courses are consciously designed to be mixers, to give students opportunities for prolonged classroom time with people from all classrooms. The set up is also enjoyable and useful for teachers. Mini-courses provide us with the opportunity to get to know students with whom we may not normally spend time. It's a two-way street. We may offer them a sympathetic ear for something they are going through. And they may be interested in a hobby or talent of ours, and we get the delight of sharing.

(For more information on mini-courses, see the 2000 fellowship paper, Mini-Courses at the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School, by Laurel Gardner, available in the Best Practices section of the Massachusetts Charter School Association Web site: www.masscharterschools.org.)

Rotating Lunchrooms

Mixing up the students among all the classrooms at lunch? Chaos! Believe it or not, this practice works well for most of our children. Each month, there are new lunchroom assignments. For example, each classroom (K-8) might be assigned to host two to three kindergarteners during lunchtime. Parents can opt their kindergarteners out if they feel this would be too overwhelming for them. Seating is planned to foster interaction between students of different ages. In addition, because everyone needs a role, a way to fit in, jobs are assigned. Remember, a student without a role will invent one. Indeed, all of our “troublemakers” have! If

we want people to have a sense of how to fit in, there needs to be some explicit description of what we want them to fit into. Jobs help define that.

Classroom Museums

Frequently, as a by-product of project-based learning, there are dioramas, science fair-type displays, etc. to share. A class might hold a “museum” open house. Other classes sign up to come visit. This may involve circulating among displays on tables, watching mini-performances, being involved in science demonstrations. For example, at the human body museum of Coco Moran’s 4/5 class, there were “Quiz Shows” where those attending were challenged to guess facts such as: “How much does the human brain weigh?” or “How many miles of nerves are there?” Other students offered a “Taste Test” to challenge the senses. On various displays there were illustrations of the workings of the systems in the Human Body. Coco’s students staged the events, or staffed the display tables, while other classes (one at a time, for about 40 minutes each) mill about. Two or three children visited a booth at a time, partaking in a quiz, display, game, demonstration, etc. For more complex “Museums,” sometimes the visiting class is split in half and each of the smaller groups get 20 minutes in which to visit. Throughout these interactions, we further our connections and appreciations of the talents, skills, interests, and abilities of others.

Sleepovers

Once a year comes a spectacular event in which the boundaries separating school and home life become more permeable, for a night. The annual sleepover is every child's dream: pizza, ice cream, your friends (and older/younger "buddies"), flashlight tag, stories from your teachers, and much, much more, all without an academic task in sight! Parent chaperones are essential to the success of this event, as are clear limits from staff and administration about what levels of supervision are sufficiently safe.

To convey limits clearly, notes go home to parents in advance. There are related announcements at All-School. And the evening of the event, there is a check-in booth where everyone must be signed in. This is a time when any questions can be answered and any lapses in recall about ground rules can be reiterated. The event is always well attended and long remembered.

Community Service Learning Projects

We've been very fortunate at our school to have a part-time community coordinator who has linked our school with a long-term care facility for elders. Each class has chosen an avenue through which to interact with the people living/being served in that facility. Grants pay for busing and supplies. A given visit might find students modeling yoga, hanging student-made holiday decorations, singing "oldies but goodies," or doing a more formal performance. This is one way the community within our school is extended to that outside of our four walls.

Keys to Implementation

The measures described in this paper are supported by Hilltown Cooperative Charter School's infrastructure. That infrastructure serves as a critical part of the school's culture. To build community, you need to consider how much of this infrastructure is already in place in your school. You may have to lay groundwork before implementation. At Hilltown, some of our supportive infrastructure consists of:

Parent Involvement

To create a welcoming atmosphere, parents need to know that staff members are interested in what they have to offer, and they need to know that their presence in the school matters. At Hilltown, parent involvement is cordially welcomed. Parents plan field trips, museum visits, and presentations. They share their interests, resources, and concrete experiences related to a curriculum topic. One thing is certain: participation and enthusiasm of parents feeds that of students, and a deeper level of intimacy and excitement is generated in the classroom because the involvement of parents.

Participatory Decision-Making Structures

The governance of Hilltown is arranged in four realms of responsibility, called "Domains" (Family, Education, Administrative, and Board). The coordinators of each domain, along with two teachers and two parents, come together to form the Management Team, which works to

ensure communication among the constituencies at the school. Decisions within these groups are made using the consensus process (itself a means of building community), which we try to model for students in the classroom as well. (For more on the decision making process and governance structure of Hilltown, see the “Leadership by Consensus: A Community-Based Approach to School Governance,” by Andras Arthen, Deirdre Arthen, and Chris Spicer, in the best practices section of the MCSA Web site: www.masscharterschools.org.)

At Hilltown, decisions about curriculum are made in a participatory manner as well. Each week, during staff meeting, head teachers, SPED Coordinators, Movement, and Art Coordinators gather to plan and make decisions by consensus. Teachers and staff members collaborate, giving all players a broader knowledge, so decisions more often take the big picture into account. Because curriculum is integrated on a weekly or even daily basis, classroom concerns get heard. Staff members get to know each other well and become more dependent upon each other for the design of the educational program. The challenge is to honor and utilize people’s expertise, a key element in creating and maintaining a welcoming atmosphere.

Student Involvement in Governance

Community-building also works in our school because students know they are part of the community of “decision-makers.” As described in this paper, students participate in daily meetings and All-School. In addition, each class has representatives in the school’s student governance council, and teachers commonly “poll” students to ascertain their feelings about events and activities being planned. Finally, to begin a topic utilizing our Conversation-Guided Curriculum, teachers regularly ask students, “What do you already know about (a given

subject)?” Students are treated as resident experts on the things about which they do indeed have much experience. Because of the respectful ways they are involved in decision-making, students feel engaged and part of the school.

Lack of a “Recipe”

As with anything else in life, there are no fixed formulas for building community among your school constituencies. There are, however, tried and true structures and tools that can promote its formation and will tend, over time, to promote the kinds of feelings you want. As the saying goes, the *good doctor* “diagnoses the need and prescribes the cure.” Thus we are left to see what voids there are within our school programs and to devise means to get structures implemented that we know have a good chance of succeeding.

Conclusion

“If you build it, they will come.” And, if it strikes a chord (and it will), they will put themselves into it and the feelings will grow exponentially, so start somewhere; think big, and begin small. As Black Elk said, “A man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see” (Elk and Neihardt 1972, 173). Making structural changes that allow us to welcome each other, share what’s important to us, display our talents, and finally, say goodbye is how we take our shared goal of community and let human nature perform its miracles for each of us to see.

About the Author

William Farkas has worked with young children and families since 1974. He currently teaches a combined K-1 class at the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School in Haydenville, Massachusetts and serves as adjunct faculty at Westfield State College. He co-parents an eight year-old son and presents workshops, “Growing Non-violent Boys.”

References

Elk, Black, & John Gneisenau Neihardt. 1972. *Black Elk Speaks, Being The Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster.

Appendix A: A Story About Buddies

“Beyonce” was a precocious kindergartener who lived in a town far removed from our school. The distance made it difficult for her family to participate in many of the social events for the school community. Thus she felt significantly less connected to her classmates and to the school as a whole.

The transition to school was difficult for her, and she cried and fussed at drop-off time. The only bright points in her day were visits from her older buddy. As is the norm, buddies from the combined 4th/5th grade often sit the young children on their laps and “snuggle” them. Beyonce’s time with her buddy was no exception. This close physical contact helped make up for mom’s absence during the school day. It gave Beyonce valuable time to adjust to being in school, get interested in an activity, and to begin to connect more with her classmates.

Her fear of the teachers, borne of lack of familiarity, and her expectations of authoritarian treatment, were alleviated some during the experience of buddying. By being able to watch the teachers’ interactions with other students from a safe place--this big 5th grader’s lap--before venturing out to interact with the teacher on her own, Beyonce came to understand that the teachers were there to help, not holler at her.

Appendix B: K/1 Students Emcee!

It's the K-1 class's turn, and my students are nervous about emceeing. The kindergarteners are not yet reading easily, and there is a lot to remember. Luckily, the first graders are more fluent, so they are paired one-on-one with kindergarteners. To make it easier for them to know what to read next, I have put their lines on individual index cards. I don't hand over the card until just before it is time to read it. Then, the older child reads it quietly, whispering it to the younger. As soon as they're done this review, they announce it in unison to the "audience."

As preparation, we play a game in the classroom, helping children understand the volume that's necessary to make an announcement heard. The child who is practicing making the announcement goes all the way to the far end of the classroom. The rest of us sit at the other end. The child makes an announcement, and we all give "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to show whether we heard it clearly or not. If it wasn't loud enough the first time, the child repeats it again until we are satisfied. This really helps students gain confidence and develop the ability to speak in public. One student, "Joseph," who is at times meek and understated in the classroom, takes more than half a dozen tries before he even gets the "thumb sideways" (meaning we can hear him a little). He keeps right on going, and neither he nor the class gets frustrated. He smiles, as if the process--not getting the "thumbs up" that he expects--is funny to him. Fifteen to twenty tries later, he is grinning ear-to-ear, as are his classmates (finally!), and he has found a new voice inside of himself that can speak up and be heard. His emceeing job goes smoothly.