Community Engagement

Chapter 5

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Community Engagement

What Is Community Engagement?

Teachers and other school employees, people who live and work in your area, government agencies, and anyone else who has an interest in your school district can be considered part of your community. The members of your community may have different needs, desires, and expectations from your needs and interests. Some community members may want to become involved in any effort that improves education and may see technology as a way to bring about that improvement. On the other hand, some community members will be indifferent or will say they don't have time to be involved. In fact, they'll allow you to make the decisions because that's what you are hired to do. However, technology planners should not go about this important work without extending the opportunity for involvement to the broader community, in either the planning stage or the integration stage.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform expands the term *community* engagement to *public* engagement. Educators, parents, and community members engage each other in "a purposeful effort, starting in either the school system or the community, to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in the schools." The key word in this definition is *collaboration.* Community engagement, therefore, is a reciprocal and collaborative relationship that draws in and includes members from the whole community.

Community engagement during technology planning is an essential part of building a sustainable system that benefits the entire community. Finding a way for school-based technology resources to be shared and used by the entire community is particularly critical in traditionally underserved areas where the technology available in schools may be the only technology available to the community. Therefore, if schools are to be of the greatest and broadest service to their community, the technology in schools should provide benefits to both students and community members.

Community engagement can extend to collaborations and consortia in which different organizations join together to undertake a larger cooperative effort. Often, for example, a school district and local university collaborate to provide staff development for the schools and practical experience for the university's teachers and students. The university gains by being involved directly with in-service teachers. The school district gains by receiving professional development without hiring a staff of trainers. In another school district, members of a local men's organization donate community time to help students repair computers and computer networks. In another collaborative example, several school districts across a state join with federal and state agencies to develop an educational curriculum supported by technology. By pooling resources, each of the different groups receives benefits that they could not attain alone.

The federal government provides Technology Innovation Challenge Grants (TICG) to support collaborative efforts of schools, communities, and businesses to bring technology into the community and the schools. Louisiana's Challenge Grant, *Louisiana's Challenge—Integration of Technology and Learning—A Pathway to the Future,* is an example of such a collaborative effort. Through this grant, state and district technology coordinators profit from the expertise and resources of university personnel, library staffs, local telephone and cable companies, museums, and others from the governmental and private sectors. The five school systems across the state that are involved in the Louisiana Challenge Grant have formed strong partnerships with participating groups and serve as a resource for other systems developing local technology plans. Each of the five systems, guided by a district technology committee, is developing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive district plan for using educational technology to raise the level of student achievement and attain educational goals.

For example, the Jefferson Elementary School of the Jefferson Parish has an array of educational technology that includes an IBM Computer Learning Center, a local area network, and a school-wide television broadcast channel, WJES, with daily student broadcasts. As a pilot site for the Greater New Orleans Free-Net, faculty and students have e-mail accounts and global electronic access to exciting places and unlimited sources of information. Jefferson hosts many business partners who help in developing the *Vision of Tomorrow's Schools,* the basis of the school-wide technology. These business partners include Shell Oil Products Company, Lockheed Martin IMS, and Kippers Communication.

For some, technology planning and implementation are part of a larger initiative to improve teaching and learning. In this scenario, community and school leaders want to introduce new curriculum ideas and teaching methods and to formulate new standards for student achievement. They see technology as a catalyst for this change. For others, technology planning and implementation are part of a general school- and community-wide improvement effort. If your school is considering embarking on these broader reform initiatives or wanting to create more opportunities for dialogue across a community, we have included some contacts and materials in the *Resources* section to help you initiate these efforts.

There are many ways to involve community members in school technology planning and integration. Community members may have expertise and skills that they can contribute or they may have access to resources that you are not aware of. Perhaps you need a building to house offices for a training room, and a member of your community is willing to donate that building. Also, members in your community can be connected to other community organizations that can also benefit from technology. If a high-speed data line is going to be brought to the local school district, perhaps the library, hospital, or community organizations can also benefit. Community members joining together can bring extra funding to help support the effort at a higher level. Local parent organizations and news media can raise the level of awareness through open houses, special computer events, or fundraising activities. Some community members may be policymakers or may have contacts with policymakers at

the local, state, or national level which can be used to further initiatives that impact your planning.

Since community involvement takes on many different forms at different times in your technology planning process, you will need to be alert to opportunities as they present themselves. Assess what human, financial, and technology resources already exist in the community to support your plan. Can they be included in, and benefit from, your technology planning?

Tools in this Chapter

THE Tools

Community Resources Worksheet. The *Community Resources Worksheet* is designed for compiling data about potential resources in your community. Your planning committee can use it to brainstorm additions based on members' knowledge of the local scene.

Key Questions. A list of detailed questions serves as a starting point for developing your own questions regarding key community engagement issues. You will probably have many of your own questions to add.

Examples of Successful Community Programs Across the Nation. The examples can help generate ideas by showing how other schools and communities have successfully become involved with technology.

Resources. The *Resources* section provides you with a list of local potential resources and a list of national organizations that promote community technology programs. Most of these organizations have web sites that you can visit for ideas or support in your community projects.

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Putting the Tools to Work

Community Resources Worksheet

Your technology planning committee can use the worksheet to identify potential community partners and resources. Be sure to include contact information on key people within each organization who are in a position to support the district's technology program.
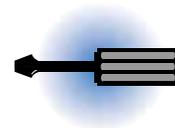
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Community Resources Worksheet

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Type and name of organization	Potential contribution or collaboration	Contact person	Who will contact them?
Colleges/ universities	Training for teachers	Dr. Sheldon @ State U.	Tech. coor. and curr. director
Libraries/ museums	Virtual field trips	Ms. Terrell @ City library	Curr. Director
Business organizations	Build support for acquisition of resources for technology/student interns	Mr. Wallace @ Chamber of Commerce	Supt.
Local businesses	Field trips to demonstrate business needs to teachers	Ms. Kopalski, Widgets, Inc.	Supt. and teachers
Religious organizations	Build support for new teaching practices	Rev. Nixon	Curr. Director and teachers
Community organizations	Build support for new teaching practices		
Local media	Highlight student work for community members	Ms. Nelson	
Telecommunications or technology organizations			

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Key Questions for Community Engagement

Community engagement requires careful consideration, because schools are composed of individuals with differing interests and backgrounds. Bringing a representative group together is an important first step in successful decision-making and planning for technology. Public support is essential to ensure the success and support of your technology efforts.

A number of organizations have produced resources to help educators make effective decisions related to community engagement and technology planning. Some of the following key questions come from the community engagement section of the North Central R•TEC's publication *Guiding Questions for Technology Planning,* which can be found on their web site at http://www.ncrtec.org. We believe that addressing these questions is a good place for educators to start when developing strategies to garner public support. Remember that you must look within your community to find solutions that fit your needs.

- **At what point in your technology planning do you need to have community members involved?**
  If you are beginning a large technology initiative in your district, you will definitely want public involvement early on. In fact, your school board will be key in approving the funding for such an effort. The more you encourage public ownership and understanding of the importance of what you are attempting to do, the more supportive of your efforts the public will be.

- **What kinds and levels of public support are necessary to make the implementation of your technology plan successful and sustainable?**
  The answer to this question depends on your goals. Are you going to place computers in teachers' classrooms, or are you going to create a community center in the school for technology users? Or will you go so far as to create an electronic community such as the Blacksburg Electronic Village in Blacksburg, Virginia (http://www.bev.net/)? In this community-wide effort, in a rural Appalachian county, citizens in homes, schools, public libraries, and places of work are connected to Virginia Tech with online access to training, user support, government information, social services, education, and business information. Or, do you want to target a more specific, limited community as was done in Lake Village, Arkansas, where the local hospital used the schools' computer labs to teach hospital staff basic computer skills?

- **How will you utilize parents and community members in the planning process?**
  Research has found that strong relationships and trust among participants are vital to the collaborative process. When bringing together groups of people with diverse interests and backgrounds, however, you need to have strategies and goals to maximize their participation. Do you have strategies for communicating effectively with parents and community members of linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse backgrounds? Have you considered how to arrive at a consensus with so many different value systems and points of

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view? There are several other issues that you may need to keep in mind. Do the same few parents and other community members serve on all the school committees? How can you get more representation so that you have different points of view? Do community members come for the first meeting and then not attend again?

- **How will you garner support from your teachers to ensure that technology implementation and integration are successful?**
  Are teachers' opinions, concerns, and ideas recognized? Have you conducted a needs assessment or focus groups to gain their input and identify the current state of technology integration? Do teachers have an opportunity to communicate and participate in the decision-making process?

- **How will you garner support from community and business leaders for long-term partnerships?**
  Many local businesses are interested in what schools are doing because they have children who are attending the local schools. Furthermore, it is possible that their future customers or employees will come from the local schools. It is in their long-term interest to participate in your technology efforts. Assess what they can contribute and include them in your planning.

- **How will you connect and interact with museums, libraries, adult literacy programs, higher education, community-based organizations, and other community-based organizations to improve student learning?**
  These organizations have educational goals that extend beyond the classroom door. They attempt to reach the general community in less formal ways. Technology has proven to be an excellent tool to support their efforts to reach a wider and more varied audience, and they make natural partners with the schools for seeking funding or carrying out projects. Following are examples of two such projects, both located in Austin, Texas.

Austin Free-Net (AFN)

Austin Free-Net (AFN) (http://www.austinfree.net/) is a nonprofit corporation providing public access to the Internet and emerging technologies for all Austin residents, especially those who don't have computers in their homes. Austin Free-Net is a community-driven project, and its services are available only in public locations. The AFN is a cooperative effort involving Austin educational, civic, and corporate entities including the University of Texas, Austin Public Library, Literacy Austin, Austin Learning Academy, Austin police and fire departments, Austin Independent School District, and other community organizations, private companies, and communications providers. Austin Free-Net focuses on addressing the needs of children and youth in low-income families. Many introductory computer and Internet classes are offered in both Spanish and English at local libraries and other community locations. AFN also teams up with local technology firms and other community organizations to deliver workforce training in technology and other technology-related service projects.

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East Austin Media Lab (EAML)

East Austin Media Lab (EAML) is a multimedia development center for disadvantaged youth. A project of Our Lady's Family Center, SER Jobs for Progress, and Austin Free-Net, EAML is one of three training labs which AFN and its partners have created for teens. It is a public access site offering high-speed (ISDN) connections to the Internet. The lab focuses on specific development tools which fit together to form a framework for community-based access and content development. You can find more details on the web at http://www.austinfree.net/EAML.

- **Are parents and community members informed regarding proposed technology integration? Do they understand its features, benefits, and drawbacks? How will their concerns be addressed?**

  It is easy to overlook the fact that some parents and community members are fearful and anxious about computer use and access to the information super-highway. How have you planned to introduce the features, benefits, and drawbacks of proposed uses of technology? Could computer technology such as e-mail, bulletin boards, or Internet access be used to improve communication between parents, schools, and other members of the community? Can you provide training and support for parents and community members so as to bring technology access and service to the wider community?

- **When thinking about your technology plan and implementation efforts, do you have both a long-term and a short-term communication plan?**

  Keeping your stakeholders, interested parties, and others aware of what you are doing requires considerable internal and external communication and public relations activities. Have you thought of ways to do this so that you can promote an effective long-term implementation of your technology plan? Do you have strategic messages for specific audiences? How will you create opportunities for school staff and the community to share information in order to foster positive relationships? How and when will you report results to internal and external stakeholders? Solicit the help of the local news media in this area. Most radio stations and television stations have public-interest air time available at no cost to educational institutions. Seek out editors who can create special features regarding your technology efforts. You should also consider some type of newsletter that is mailed directly to all your teachers and community members. If your school board already has such a vehicle in place, consider making regular contributions to that newsletter.

  We often start work with a technology planning committee by telling them that the plan they are creating is, in fact, a *public document.* This establishes the idea that one of the key purposes of the technology plan is communication. In the area of community engagement, this becomes especially important. The technology plan should effectively communicate your school's vision, goals, and intended actions for technology implementation. Naturally, then, this is something that you will want to make available to all members

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of your community to garner their support. An example follows of how this was done in one community.

Carteret County School System

When the Carteret County School System (Beaufort, NC) and the county commissioners decided to offer the voters a $6.2 million local bond for technology, they developed a communication plan for the community. Using everything from public service announcements on TV and radio, to cable-TV programs, to fliers and posters, bond sponsors from the two groups worked to alert and inform the community of the benefits of the funding. As a result of the efforts to communicate with the various stakeholders, the bond was passed. Not only did it pass with a comfortable margin, but many community members continued to be involved on district planning committees, on school volunteer teams, and in publicizing successful school technology uses in the local media.

Examples of Successful Community Programs Across the Nation

Indian Creek's Electronic Bulletin Board: A Community Link

This project helped the school and community learn more about technology. It started with $18,000 of district and state funds from a Kansas State Board of Education Excellence Grant in 1993. The motive for seeking those funds was to improve K–6 students' state and national reading achievement scores by getting them to use their reading and writing skills. The bulletin-board system provided a practical reason for students to do just that. The grant allowed the purchase of bulletin-board software, a computer to use as the server, and 80 videotext terminals for students to use from home. The Community Link Bulletin Board system started operation in November 1993 with four phone lines. The current list of users includes 211 students, 153 parents and family members, 11 key pals from a Topeka retirement home, and 29 Indian Creek staff. The Indian Creek Community Link Bulletin Board has been a unique experience for an entire community. Its members have enjoyed a sense of accomplishment as they became acquainted with the technology and its functions. The bulletin board has been a safe first step for families to gain understanding of networks and experience with electronic communication. The school and its staff have earned the reputation of being technologically progressive. And the dollar cost has been minimal when compared to the benefits to entire families and a whole school. The bulletin board continues to grow and mature each year as the community learns together.

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Onaway High School Black River Design: An Experience in Technology

This is a story of how a local high school met its community's needs through its technology efforts. In return, the community supported the students' work through job opportunities.

Onaway High School's art department is unique. It includes one of the most advanced high school computer graphics labs in the state of Michigan, and it has developed in—and is now serving—a low-income, high-unemployment area of northern Michigan. OHS Black River Design has added a dimension of a student-run technology business that also provides the community's link to desktop publishing, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. The goal of the program is to expose the community, through the students, to technologies such as the Internet and desktop publishing, and to encourage the students to become local entrepreneurs, adding to the employment possibilities in the area. Through computer classes at the high school, OHS Black River Design produces a variety of products, including calendars, T-shirts, posters, business cards, signs, flyers, and web pages for local businesses. The clientele has grown enormously.

Equally significant, OHS Black River Design is not in competition with hard-pressed local businesses, as the nearest similar operation is forty-five minutes away and the program's goal is to do much of its business via the Internet. Many other OHS classes benefit from this program. The high school band, the junior high journalism course, and the high school yearbook make use of the art department's computer lab and have been helped by students in the computer graphics classes. Likewise, students in the computer graphics program are gaining skills other than computer literacy. They improve their writing skills by writing blurbs for the local newspaper. They learn about advertising by designing advertising materials for local businesses and by doing the program's own promotions. Students also learn accounting skills as they themselves do the bookkeeping and write proposals for new equipment.

Community interest in the program has been very favorable, and the community-elected board of education has been supportive. Parents have also become very excited about the program, and more of them attend open houses than ever before. There has been a great increase in parental interest in what the students are learning, and the students seem to enjoy showing their parents what they've learned.

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Net Day

One of the largest collaborative community efforts has been *Net Day,* a grassroots volunteer effort to wire K–12 schools across the US. Even though the effort varied across states and across the nation, community involvement was the core ingredient to success. On the first *Net Day,* held in October of 1996, businesspeople, telecommunications trade workers, parents, students, and educators pulled wire and punched connections to create classroom Internet access. *Net Day* has become an annual event which has enabled thousands of schools to be connected to the Internet. By bringing together these diverse elements, *Net Day* establishes a framework for lasting partnerships among the business, governmental, educational, and other local communities that provide ongoing support for our schools.

The CyberEd Tour: Taking the Internet on the Road

In the fall of 1995, President Clinton challenged corporate America to join him in an effort to bring educational technology into every classroom in America. Bert Roberts, CEO and chairman of MCI Communications, responded quickly. His offer? CyberEd! CyberEd was an eighteen-wheel, big-rig truck, a state-of-the-art, fully functional cyber classroom on wheels, providing both videoconferencing and Internet access. CyberEd's five-month, fifteen-city national tour during the spring and summer of 1996 pursued a two-fold mission: to provide hands-on Internet experiences to teachers, administrators, community leaders, parents, and students; and to serve as a catalyst for local commitment to educational technology. The CyberEd journey was fueled by a coalition of nonprofit corporate and private foundation partners, including MCI Foundation, the Milken Family Foundation, Microsoft Corporation, the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund, Corning Incorporated, and DSC Communications Corporation. TECH CORPS, a national nonprofit organization, joined the effort and served as project manager, providing logistical coordination, program content, and instructors for the truck. TECH CORPS supports K–12 schools across the country by bringing in both people and resources to enhance educational technology efforts locally. CyberEd gave TECH CORPS a valuable training tool to offer schools; TECH CORPS, meanwhile, provided CyberEd with hands-on volunteer expertise that would remain behind after the truck left. In April, Bert Roberts, Education Secretary Richard Riley, and FCC Chairman Reed Hundt joined Vice President Al Gore in front of the White House to launch the truck officially. From there, it began a 25,000-mile odyssey, crisscrossing the United States and, along the way, bringing a rich educational-technology resource to the country's Empowerment Zones, federally defined areas of our country which most need an infusion of economic resources. CyberEd needs to be replicated in communities across the country—not necessarily as an eighteen-wheeler or as a national initiative. What must be reproduced is that which brings communities together to support technology in the schools; that which empowers educators, parents, and students to learn more and to learn better; and that which gives all of us the tools to compete in the workplace of today and tomorrow.

Mini-Libraries in Underserved Communities

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, there is a recently grown program that shows promise in a number of large cities both within and outside the US. The idea is to have mini-libraries with videos, a few computers, and Internet access to make technology much more available to poor communities. These resources—configured as a mini-library—can be placed in community centers, public housing complexes, or other areas where city services have not traditionally gone. Internationally, the government of Argentina has announced a similar program to provide access to the poor. Overall, this is an idea that is quickly taking hold in many places as a way to engage communities with technology and, in some cases, to create communities in areas where residents are very isolated.

Starting at the Beginning: Linking Early Childhood Educators

The Sharing Place is a child-care center located in the community building of Talmar Wood, a low- to middle-income housing development in Orono, Maine. It provides care for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children. An important need is to use computer networking to exchange and manage information to help the children the center serves—and all young children—to reach their full potential. The center believes that networking can promote collaboration with adults in education and in the community to support lifelong learning. Two key events have taken place to realize these technology needs of the Sharing Place and the housing development. A listserv, Child-MEET (Maine Early Education Tele-collaborative), started in November 1996 as a first step toward creating an early-childhood education-information infrastructure in the state of Maine. Child-MEET aspires to be an online meeting place for thoughtful discussion and collaboration toward a common goal—quality early care and education for all of Maine's children. In 1996, Talmar Wood applied for and received HUD funding to create a "Neighborhood Network" technology center—the first in the state of Maine—to bring Internet access to the residents of Talmar Wood and the surrounding community. The Sharing Place will benefit from the new center, which opened across the street in August 1997. The computer learning center also provides access to senior citizens living in other low-income housing developments operated by The Housing Foundation, and new opportunities for intergenerational community building. Adult education, job-skills training, and senior and youth computer literacy programs are all in the plans for the new center. Partnerships with businesses, the University of Maine, public schools, adult-education providers, and others in the community will help the center to develop and the Talmar Wood housing development to connect with the community in new ways.

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CyberSmart!

CyberSmart! is a community-involvement project that helps parents teach their children Internet safety, especially if the school provides dial-up access. The CyberSmart! program focuses on five key topics to ensure that children's Internet experiences are safe and rewarding. Its web site (http://www.cybersmart.org) is the first to provide teachers with key resources to guide their students online. The CyberSmart! School Program was founded as a nonprofit organization in 1998 by online industry veterans and parents with the cooperation of the Somerset Hills School District, New Jersey, and the input of a preeminent group of advisors. Their vision is to provide children with the tools necessary to become safe, responsible, and powerful cybercitizens. Advisors to the program include, among others, Senator Dianne Feinstein (D: California), Congressman Bob Franks (R: New Jersey), B. Keith Fulton (National Urban League), The Somerset Hills School District, Jonathan Carson (Family Education Network), and Lori Fena (Electronic Frontier Foundation).

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Resources

Community Engagement Resources

There are many local and national organizations that promote community technology projects. Check the following resources that might be in your community. While we believe, in the spirit of community engagement, that your committee should seek primary support from your own community, there may be tremendous benefits to contacting national groups. Many national programs have state and local affiliates, and may be able to tell you how to bring some of their programs into your community.
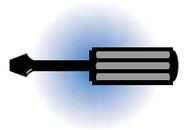
Local Organizations

The following list of local organizations was developed by NASA's Center for Technology Commercialization and is available online at http://www.ctc.org.

- Post-secondary institutions, including technical, junior, and community colleges, extension services, and/or university departments

- Fraternities and sororities or outreach programs associated with colleges and universities

- Libraries and museums

- Local business organizations such as the Chambers of Commerce, Kiwanis, Rotary, BPOE, VFW, professional women's organizations, local unions

- Major manufacturers, businesses, government agencies in or near your neighborhood, restaurants, travel agencies, data services, police

- Religious institutions and associated special interest groups

- Community-based organizations: YMCA and/or YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, senior centers, credit unions, clinics, homeless shelters, community action agencies, literacy programs, cultural or ethnic clubs or associations, arts councils

- Press and media: local newspapers, local-access cable stations, magazines, circulators of advertising, billboard companies

- Local or regional free-nets or other telecommunications providers

National Organizations

http://www.ctcnet.org

The Community Technology Centers' Network (CTCNet) is a network of more than 400 community technology centers where people can gain access to computers. The sites are enormously diverse in program areas and participating populations. Some are stand-alone centers; others operate as part of a larger organization such as a multi-service agency or museum, job training center, shelter, cable public-access center, and so on. The web site provides links to some of the community

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centers' web sites and other related links. All centers support equitable access to computers.

http://www.100blackmen.org

The service organization 100 Black Men of America, Inc., founded in 1963, is a national alliance of leading African-American men of business, industry, public affairs, and government who devote their combined skills and resources to confronting the challenges facing African-American youth. This organization is very active in sponsoring a variety of community programs using technology, including computer clinics, the Community Computer Bus, a computer recycling program, and a youth development program.

http://www.ustc.org

TECH CORPS is a national nonprofit organization, funded through corporate contributions and implemented through state chapters. TECH CORPS's philosophy is to draw on the expertise and enthusiasm of technology-literate members of the local community. The mission of TECH CORPS is to (1) recruit, place, and support volunteers from the technology community who provide advice and assistance to schools in the introduction and integration of new technologies; (2) bring additional technology resources to schools through local and national projects; and (3) build partnerships in support of educational technology among educators, businesses, and community members at the local, state, and national levels.

http://www.til.org

Technology-in-Learning (TiL) is a computer-literacy program dedicated to providing technology-based learning activities for all members of underserved communities. Its goal is to produce positive change in the economic and social conditions that divide our society, through progressive training programs and community-building activities. Its programs and activities assist individuals and organizations in their use of technology to access information and services, while providing valuable educational experiences and employment skills to residents in the community. Technology-in-Learning collaborates with community organizations desirous of employing computer technology. In all of its projects, Technology-in-Learning focuses on the problem of computer illiteracy to facilitate stronger bonds between technology and low-income communities.

http://www.compumentor.org

CompuMentor is the largest nonprofit computer-assistance organization in the US. Since 1987, CompuMentor has utilized its consulting staff and volunteer mentors to provide training and support services and low-cost software to more than 6,000 nonprofits and schools. Recent major CompuMentor projects include *Year 2000* support for nonprofits, development of community technology centers, acquisition of donated software (CompuMentor is one of two organizations designated by Microsoft to implement its national software donation program), development of an inexpensive-hardware web resource, and various forms of

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circuit riding, consulting, and mentoring, including remote mentoring and matching of mentors with low-income youth trying to enter the high-technology job market.

Other Resources

http://www.sedl.org/sedl/community.html

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), a regional educational laboratory, works with members of the community at large through Collaborative Action Teams to help them identify education-related issues and plan strategies for addressing them. Using SEDL's research-based tools, members of a school community can join with members of the broader community to support positive student outcomes.

http://www.ed.gov/Technology/challenge/

Visit the Department of Education's web site for more information regarding Technology Innovation Challenge Grants from the federal government.

http://www.aisr.brown.edu

A report of the Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education, *Reasons for hope: Voices for change* is based on an eighteen-month effort to identify, map, and describe a variety of public-engagement projects across America. It offers a look at how local, civic, business, and school initiatives across the country are developing the skills necessary to involve their communities in the work of improving public education.

http://www.nsba.org

Visit this web site sponsored by the National School Boards Association to gather more tools and resources for your community efforts.

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Putting It All Together

A conversation about community engagement

Our district and region include some of the most underserved populations and areas in the country. Just how realistic is it to expect that they can support our technology efforts?
You're right, in many underserved areas across the country, the community has nothing but its schools. In these areas, the schools often have much more to offer in terms of hardware and technical expertise than does the general community. If this describes your community, you should try to seek out support that money can't buy—time, willingness to learn, and long-term commitment.

Technology can benefit an entire community because it gives focus to that community. It's surprising how many people in a community want to help their schools but do not know how to go about doing so. It's important for the school to communicate with the community, which you can do by using your technology plan as a vehicle for communication. Break down the specific tasks in ways that school outsiders can see where their efforts can be best used. In this way, the technology plan becomes a framework for community support.

So, for the most part, do you think that community support should be defined as nonphysical resources?
You can get computer hardware and software from many places across the country, but you can't get local community support from anywhere else. So, be realistic about what your community can provide. Of course, you will need funding to carry out your projects. However, a substantial amount of state and federal funding is currently available that can supplement your local funding. Less-endowed districts are frequently the first to qualify for this money. A whole-community effort is more likely to appeal to these funders. You need to keep up to date on deadlines for submitting proposals, write good proposals, and keep your technology plan updated.

One thing you haven't addressed: How can schools deal with various kinds of technology donations that may come from the community, such as older computers from businesses?
If the gifts aren't usable, they become a burden. This is not to say that all secondhand equipment is worthless. We have seen a number of schools benefit tremendously from donations of recently retired computers. But in order to make these donations work, the businesses doing the donating need to be aware of the school's existing infrastructure and support mechanisms. For example, donating machines without hard drives to a school is generally not helpful. Before you say "yes" to any of these donations, do a preliminary investigation. We are finding that some larger businesses update their computers every three years or so. In this situation, the old computers are adequate for classroom use. However, you need to find out whether you have compatible software for these

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computers. If you can't use the donation, keep in mind that one facet of good community relations is knowing when and how to say "no thanks." However, you can use a direct approach to solicit donations for things you do need. First inventory your current needs, and then contact a potential donor with a "thanks for your donation" letter that describes what you need. This will help that donor in making useful and appropriate choices.

What about support from businesses that includes some commercial advertising, endorsement, or other commercial messages?

We assume you mean things such as telecommunications services or computers that are provided free to schools but also carry some sort of advertising or commercial message. Your school or school district needs to evaluate this situation, and some schools already have policies regarding the matter. Clearly, most business donations carry some sort of commercial content, even if it's just a sign or plaque that gets posted near the donated equipment. What many schools object to is continuous commercial messages such as advertising banners that are woven into the Windows desktop or messages that appear on a school web page. We think that many schools find this latter type of commercialization annoying. But on the other hand, if you want to maintain a positive, ongoing relationship with businesses, it is important to acknowledge their contributions.

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Chapter 5: Community Engagement

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Planning into Practice