

Educators Make the Case for Community Engagement

BY GLORIA RUBIO-CORTÉS

You might have thought it was a championship basketball game. Banners adorned the school entrance. Balloons flew over the school sign. The school marching band was making its last-minute adjustments in the hallway. Energy and excitement were in the air. Students, parents, business leaders, community members, and former U.S. Senator Jean Carnahan were there to celebrate and recognize an amazing educator.

Instead of a sports victory, I was attending a community celebration honoring one of the school's leaders. No, more accurately, I should call her a *community leader*. Community celebrations differ from sports celebrations because they are not spectator sports. Everyday people are the stars. Their participation drives the action, and they are at the center of its results. Their success is the community's success. And, unlike sports victories, the pride does not fade into the day's realities. Instead, community success can be seen all around, everywhere you look. It may be in the faces of successful youths, first in their family headed for college, who years ago were written off as not college material. Someone believed in them, and that belief was essential to success.

It takes courage, determination, experience, and the *entire* community to turn around a failing school. It takes a leader who can rally the neighbors, businesses, government, parents, and the youths themselves to refuse to accept failure. Instead they collaborate, innovate, and take action. A successful school is born, but it takes a lot of work. You may have hoped that a white knight would ride into town and turn things around, but reality sets in and you understand that it won't happen unless *you* do something. Sometimes it feels daunting; the heavy lifting is hard. In the end, it is the vision of what can be that drives you. You can almost see the generations of youths and their families who will benefit from a successful school. Hope fills the air.

Editor's Note: The descriptions and quotes used in the stories about featured educators were drawn from interviews and research conducted by NCL staff members who worked on the program.

St. Louis principal Alice Roach led such a campaign to defeat the status quo—a school plagued with student violence, vandalism, low expectations, and abysmal student attendance. This high-stakes battle resulted in the new Mel Carnahan High School of the Future, a school that is leading the way in using technology to prepare students for the jobs of the future in a global market. It was a partnership among the St. Louis school district, Dell, AT&T, the University of Missouri, and the community. The new-concept school sought to create a “cohesive community of learners” and meet an ambitious goal of 100 percent high school graduation and acceptance into college.

Alice Roach was one of twenty-five principals named MetLife Foundation Ambassador In Education in 2008. She was an experienced principal handpicked for this challenge. “With essentially the same student population, she counseled rather than punished, coached rather than scolded, and effectively raised the level of student, parent, and community involvement,” said one of the school's educators. She knew how to bring “passion for learning to a school, show affection for every student, and at the same time set high standards” that led to excellence. She delayed her retirement to do this. By the end of the 2009 school year, she had passed the torch to one of her able administrators. Sometimes, it takes just one person to lead the charge, but we know from Alice Roach's experience that it took an army of people to get the job done and keep the dream alive.

Principal Roach is one of more than 100 MetLife Foundation Ambassadors In Education who make the case for community engagement in the nation's public schools. Every day, teachers and principals find new and effective ways to draw the community and the school closer together. Parents are invited in. Business and nonprofits are asked to share their knowledge and mentor the students and the parents. Partnerships are developed with neighboring schools or schools across town. And educators find a way to

help students understand the world, to understand that they have a role in shaping it and that it is their responsibility to take an active part in their community and their world to find solutions to society's most complex and pressing challenges.

It has been seven years since the National Civic League partnered with MetLife Foundation to identify and recognize principals and teachers who have taken a leadership role to connect school and community in an effective and innovative way. In this article, we tell you about only a few of them, although all deserve to be spotlighted. The educators we highlight here are examples of what is going on across this country. (Some of these educators may have moved on to other schools, but in this article we identify them with the school where they worked when they won their award.) We hope that their stories motivate you and other educators to take on the important role of connector of school and community. After the educators' stories, we will share National Civic League observations resulting from directing the MetLife Foundation's Ambassadors In Education Awards.

Together, National Civic League and MetLife Foundation established the MetLife Foundation Ambassadors In Education Awards Program in 2003. Its purpose was to recognize public middle and high school educators who work to strengthen their schools and their surrounding communities by building relationships among all community stakeholders. By recognizing, rewarding, and spotlighting these educators, the program encouraged others to take similar extraordinary steps for the benefit of their schools and communities.

NCL's core values of collaboration, civic engagement, inclusion and diversity, and innovation were the foundation of this important program. MetLife Foundation's Ambassadors In Education Awards was one of two national award programs the league was conducting. The other one, All-America City Awards, is now in its sixty-first year. It is the first and most prestigious community award that energizes people to achieve more than they ever believed possible. Both programs spotlight and celebrate what can be accomplished when people work together.

There are four overarching themes of school-community collaboration and success evident in the MetLife Foundation Ambassadors In Education Awards over the life of this program:

- Schools are a valuable community resource.
- Schools can be more successful if they educate and involve the entire family.
- Community dreams can result from school leadership.
- Schools play an important role in promoting youth civic engagement and preparing youths for their global role in solving society's challenges.

Schools Are a Valued Community Resource

Invite the Community in as Partners

In the 1980s, I had the opportunity to help design a parent leadership program in Los Angeles. At the heart of that program was the need to help low-income parents engage with their children's school beyond attending back-to-school night and teacher conferences. They had a responsibility to make it the best possible educational experience. Today, the need is just as great for parent and community involvement in schools. Schools are local treasures that increase in value when a broad cross section of the community is proactively involved.

In New York City, parent anger with overcrowded programs and ineffective school administration that "relegated parent input to bake sales and raffles" led to the Cypress Hills Community School, a parent-governed partnership between the school district and a local community development corporation in Brooklyn. Parents are involved in hiring, curriculum decisions, and tracking student achievement. They hired co-director Irene Leon, who turned her school into a community laboratory for learning by identifying community resources and bringing them into the school. Students created a community garden, studied local history and architecture through a nonprofit partnership, and participated in the annual Penny Harvest to practice civic responsibility and philanthropy. Leon cited the power of a grassroots movement and collaboration as key factors in the school's success.

Across the country, in Los Angeles, community pride resulted from extensive community and parental involvement in establishing a new school in nearby Arleta. Linda Calvo, the school's first principal, took the critical initial step of asking the community what they needed out of the school. From then on, the school's relationship with the community grew as parents, business owners, and neighbors were asked to work closely to build support for school programs through active advisory committees. Arleta High School established a relationship with Los Angeles Mission College to create an early college program, enabling high school students to earn college credit. Calvo also worked with local community agencies and the city attorney's office to build a network of intervention and services supporting student attendance and public safety. MetLife Foundation and the National Civic League recognized Calvo at a weekday morning breakfast jam-packed with parents, neighbors, local government, public safety officials, and students. The event was a visual indicator of the community's embrace of this school.

Sometimes you have to get out of the school and into the community, to hear from people and gain their trust. This is the philosophy of William Smith, principal of Southwest Community High in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "In coffee shops, I meet grandparents, alumni, and community members without children in our schools," he told us. "Many of these contacts would never happen if I sat in my office and waited for them to come in. . . . I think parents feel comfortable in their own environments and believe they can talk more freely than in an official (school) setting. . . . I believe they want to trust the school, and the openness of the coffee shop suggests that there are not secrets and we are open to discussion and want to listen."

Andrea Walker, principal of Compton-Drew Middle School in St. Louis, not only looked for opportunities to partner with neighboring schools but found ways the school could add value to the broader community. When St. Louis University High School, just one block away, needed a practice and athletic field, she invited them to develop an adjacent vacant lot. Students from both schools benefited. She invited Fontbonne University and the University of Missouri-St. Louis to conduct after-school and evening classes at Compton-Drew Middle School.

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Schools Can Educate and Involve the Entire Family

In Tampa, Benito Middle School conducted life skills workshops for parents while their children attended school dances. Principal Bobby Smith said, "This allowed parents to attend a school workshop without concern for providing child care. . . . The dances helped create a feeling that our school is a focal point within our community, serving as an educational resource to all stakeholders. And parents were able to gain information on topics such as curriculum, parenting skills, and safety."

In Boston, Angela Capucci, a world languages teacher at Health Careers Academy, worked with her Latina culture advisory students to inform family and friends about health care challenges. She invited specialists from the city's hospital and local college into the classroom. Capucci also motivated students to research teen health issues and share their information through a website for peers and a monthly bilingual newsletter.

A Parent University Program begun at the Charlotte, North Carolina, McClintock Middle School brings in families for dinner and a seminar. The seminars provide guidance for parents on nutrition, resume writing, and budgeting and finance. Principal Pamela Espinosa created a McClintock Partners in Education Program to offer academic enrichment opportunities (weekly family night, tutoring, and summer programs) for students and their families (partnered with the local community college to offer classes in English as a second language during family night and a GED program).

Community Dreams Can Result from School Leadership New Community Institutions.

The Serenity Garden for Wildlife Conservation combined environmental education and service learning, and invited the broader community into U.S. Grant High School in Los Angeles. Gladys Aldana, a history teacher, orchestrated the collaboration of high school students, members of local nonprofits, and community college

students that established and continues to maintain the garden.

An Organic Garden and Day Care Center for Single Parents. At Boston Day and Evening Academy, an organic garden is a collaboration between the city and school. There students plant, harvest, and donate vegetables to families in need. Academy Co-Director Margaret Maccini also recruited a local church to start a day care center for single parents. She “brings the community to the school,” a colleague said in a letter to NCL. “She also brings the school to the community.”

Houses for Low-Income Families. Jim Sweeney, a carpentry instructor at Randolph Technical High School in Detroit, led a student effort to design and build houses for low-income families through a partnership with two nonprofits. A colleague at the school said, “Training carpenters who also have a sense of history and skill to preserve the architectural uniqueness of a neighborhood is an extremely valuable service to the students, their communities, and indeed, all of Detroit.”

Emergency Response. Devon Day, an English teacher at Wilson Classical High School in Long Beach, California, formed an amateur radio and emergency communications group in a partnership among the school, the local fire department, and the Associated Radio Amateurs of Long Beach (ARALB). The program allows youths to interact with emergency services nonprofits and the local fire department. The ARALB president called this program valuable because it “builds a sense of responsibility to a greater good. They [the students] become part of a larger plan for emergency response, representing their school to the community and the government.”

A Community Speaker Series. Principal Dora Carson of Meadowdale High School in Dayton, Ohio, asked the school and surrounding community in a two-day strategic planning retreat what their dreams were and how the school could help. The result was the creation of Smaller Learning Communities, a program that draws on the community’s expertise and experience with a community speaker series.

Preparing Students to Address Global Problems

Schools play an important role in preparing youths for civic engagement as problem solvers in our global society. Nancy Weisskopf, principal of McLean Middle School in Fort Worth, Texas, challenged her students to raise money for Hurricane Katrina survivors. To match their fundraising efforts, she parachuted out of an airplane. “The purpose was to do something that would get the kids engaged and excited about helping others,” she said. “It worked.”

Michael Schaffer, a government and macroeconomic teacher at Central Campus in Des Moines, Iowa, formed partnerships with businesses and organizations including the Virtual Trade Mission and the Iowa State Education Association. The partnerships enabled him and his students to travel to Australia and Vietnam to witness the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. One of those students said afterward, “This was an eye-opening experience. I feel so connected to the world community now that I have had this opportunity.”

Mark Nixon, the principal at East Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, hosted a local community task force to discuss and resolve community issues affecting the school. He also promoted student forums in youth civic education.

Beverly Hides-Moriello, the Goethe Elementary School principal in Chicago, invited public meetings and local community groups into the school. She built a relationship with the Chicago Police Department community group working to keep the neighborhood safe.

In Minneapolis, Anwatin Middle School Principal Beth Russell encouraged community service. A hunger awareness program evolved into an Empty Bowls project that reached beyond the school into the community. Students researched hunger and created informational brochures about the problem. The brochures were attached to students’ clay bowls, which were sold to raise funds for a food pantry.

NCL featured these and many other educators in its annual best practices reports from 2006 to 2009,

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published in past issues of *National Civic Review* and online. They are intended to be a source of inspiration for us all. Go to NCL's website (www.ncl.org) to read more stories of innovation and connection.

National Civic League Observations

I reflect on the words of a past National Civic League chairman, John W. Gardner, when I think about this program. He talked about the importance of unleashing human potential. That is what educators do by creating opportunities for youths to imagine what they can be and make a difference in the world.

There was one junior high school teacher who most shaped my own career choice. Mr. DeStefano taught journalism. I didn't know anything about journalism, but I had heard he was a great teacher and signed up for his class. I discovered a way to "learn" about many things. I worked on school newspapers in junior high school, high school, and college, obtaining undergraduate and graduate journalism degrees. With those skills, I've been able to tell the stories of people in need and how donors can help. Although I've rarely worked as a journalist, I've used those skills to imagine and work toward a more just world.

At the National Civic League, we don't take enough time to write about what we've learned. We do work hard at incorporating those learnings into our work every day in communities. This article gives us a chance to present a few reflections.

Recognizing and Celebrating Educators Who Connect School and Community

In society, we seek out leaders and role models because they inspire us. Hopefully, we take action as a result. MetLife Foundation Ambassadors In Education not only connected school and community but also planted seeds of civic engagement, excellence, and hope in thousands of young people. I was moved to tears at many celebrations when I heard from these hard-working educators that it was the

first time in twenty or thirty years of service they had been recognized! We must do better. Next time you talk to an educator, express your thanks for what he or she does every day.

Contribute to and Benefit from Civic Life

For many years, I worked for an organization that promoted equal opportunity for Latinos. When I was selected to head up the National Civic League—the first woman and person of color to hold this position for this century-old organization—my attention shifted to equality and civic life. I firmly believe that we all deserve an equal chance to contribute to and benefit from civic life. From filling out the census, voting, or serving on volunteer boards and commissions to carrying out public service and more, we should all participate equally. And we should all be beneficiaries of civic life.

We need to promote civic literacy in schools, particularly among the most underserved populations. Recent research reports that civic opportunities in schools are being delivered inequitably. "One clear and consistent set of relationships was observed in all three studies," said Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middough in their contribution to the book *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*. "Students who are more academically successful and those with parents of higher social economic status receive more classroom-based civic learning opportunities. . . . Thus, as we discuss ways to better emphasize civics within curricular frameworks, to provide professional development, and to foster more civically oriented extracurricular activities, particular emphasis is placed on structuring these efforts so as to augment equity at the same time that we aim to promote more civic learning opportunities for everyone" (pp. 42–43).

Connect Youths with Local Government

At a recent National Civic League Board meeting, graduate students working on one of our community engagement projects said they greatly appreciated the opportunity to work with local government. Board members' eyes lit up almost as brightly as the students' eyes. A fruitful discussion ensued about what had been learned and why it was important. Everyone went home feeling good and inspired to find ways to involve youths in their local government.

We saw much connecting of youths with local government in the MetLife Foundation Ambassadors In Education Awards Program. I am reminded of Maryann Wolfe, a social science and English teacher at Oakland (California) Technical High School, who pursued opportunities for high school students to learn about local government, meet their Congress members, and participate in a mock trial program conducted in partnership with local attorneys. A parent who nominated Wolfe said, "Public schools are integral to our democracy. Oakland Tech shines as a possibility for what can be when dedicated teachers, administrators, parents, students, and communities work to change the outcomes."

Then there was Tom O'Malley from East Central High School of Tulsa, Oklahoma. He invited local government into his school; the district council held town hall meetings there to be accessible to students and the neighborhood.

I could go on.

Connecting youths with local government is a job for all of us. Take action, and then email your story to the National Civic League at ncl@ncl.org. We want to include your experience among the stories of these educators and community innovators.

In closing, National Civic League thanks MetLife Foundation for its support and partnership. MetLife

Foundation President and CEO A. Dennis White and Director of Education Programs A. Richardson Love, along with their predecessors, offered invaluable ideas and support for seven years. We thank the many MetLife representatives who took the time to join in the celebrations and present crystal apples to educators and a grant check of \$5,000 to the schools to continue their efforts. Finally, we thank former National Civic League President Christopher T. Gates for his vision and the collaboration with MetLife Foundation that led to creating this program and realizing its many successes.

Although the awards component of this program ended with the 2009 school year, these educator stories will live on National Civic League's new website featuring community success stories. Their stories have enlivened the pages of this journal and remain in the hearts of the thousands of youths these educators touched, as well as their families and communities across this country.

Reference

Kahne, J., and Middough, E. "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School." In J. Youniss and P. Levine (eds.), *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009.

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