



Sustainable Community Schools

Backpack Activity

Based on an activity developed

by NEW SETTLEMENT APARTMENTS PARENT ACTION COMMITTEE

GOALS

- To increase participants' understanding of sustainable community schools as a strategy to achieve the schools all our children deserve.
- To deepen understanding of the five elements of sustainable community schools and ensure that the strategy is a holistic one that goes beyond wrap-around services and supports.
- To build excitement and momentum for organizing to win sustainable community schools.
- To jumpstart further discussion, such as how to win community school policies and/or on what it takes to transform existing schools into sustainable community schools.

MATERIALS

1. Manila envelope with photo of backpack taped to it
2. Inside the envelope, seven cards representing some common issues that get in the way of learning, related to the five areas that sustainable community schools are meant to address (see table below – there can be more than one issue for each essential element)
3. Five blank cards in case there are other issues to add to the backpack envelope
4. Chart paper and markers
5. AROS one-pager with the definition of a sustainable community school

Essential elements of sustainable community schools	Issues addressed by each essential element
Curriculum that is engaging, culturally relevant, and rigorous	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boring content and instruction• No art, no music
High-quality teaching, not high-stakes testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High-stakes standardized tests
Wrap-around supports such as health care, eye care, and social and emotional services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health issues• Trauma
Positive discipline practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High suspension rate
Transformational parent and community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low turnout at parent teacher conferences

THE ACTIVITY

Open with a conversation about issues facing participants' schools and communities and whether their schools are adequately addressing them and supporting students.

Explain that this activity can help us think about ways for schools to better address these issues and to create a vision for the schools all children deserve. Or, if participants are already familiar with the concept of sustainable community schools, you can say that this activity aims to build deeper understanding of the essential elements of sustainable community schools.

The cards with the issues (trauma, high-stakes testing, etc.) represent the often-overlooked "baggage" that students carry around with them, including ways that their schools are not serving them well. Every issue in a student's "backpack" weighs the student down and keeps her or him from growing and learning. Sustainable community schools is a strategy that seeks to engage all stakeholders in creating conditions at the school that lighten all students' backpacks, support student growth in myriad ways, and keep them connected to their communities.

Divide into groups of 4 to 6 people each and hand out one "backpack" envelope to each group. Instruct each group to:

1. Assign a note-taker and reporter.
2. Take 15 to 30 minutes and remove each item from the backpack, one at a time, and then discuss how the participants' schools or other schools could address the issue. (The facilitator may want to pick one issue to discuss in the large group as a model for what they are to do.) Let folks know that they likely won't get through every issue in their backpack and that's okay.
3. Report back. You can decide how, but it works well to have one group report out on one issue and then have others add their thoughts on the same issue, rather than have each group report out on everything.

This can all happen verbally OR you can have a drawing of an outline of schoolhouse on newsprint and as people report back, the facilitator can categorize the strategies inside the "school house."

In the end, and through the discussion and the drawing, the group has essentially created a sustainable community school. At this point, the AROS one-pager can be shared.

Based on an activity developed by New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee, Bronx, New York
For more on New Settlement Apartments, see http://www.settlementhousingfund.org/new_settlement.html

Design and production by Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University
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