Morino Institute

Community@work:
Rethinking How We Help Young People

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I am pleased to be a part of the Potomac Regional Education Partnership's Spring Conference. The theme for today's conference, *Capitalizing on the Knowledge Economy*, is one that I believe to be of great importance, and one that I've been intensely involved in as a result of our work with the Potomac KnowledgeWay, especially in workforce development.   Today, I will not be speaking on workforce issues directly, but, instead, would like to discuss a different facet of the theme. It deals with a challenge we all face—that so many here in our region, especially young people, will not have the opportunity to be part of this knowledge economy and what we can do to help them have a chance.

To begin, I want to read a brief description which captures many of the problems we face today:

> "The social organism has broken down through large districts of our great cities. Many of the people living there are very poor, the majority of them without leisure or energy for anything but the gain of subsistence....
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> Public schools in the poorest and most crowded wards of the city are inadequate to the number of children, and many teachers are ill-prepared and overworked.…And what happens to these children when they are no longer in public schools? Many of them never come under the influence of a professional teacher nor a cultivated friend. Society at large does little for their intellectual development."

Jane Addams, the reformer who spurred the settlement house movement in the U.S., wrote this in 1892. And yet, a century later, her words seem remarkably familiar: too many people remain in poverty or are considered the working poor, too many schools are inadequate, teachers are overworked and not well supported and children living in low-income areas are deprived of opportunities, resources and hope.

Even more troubling, drugs and violence take a toll in ways difficult to grasp by those of us living in these times, and that for Addams would have been unimaginable. The problems we face may also be more complex: the politics of school financing, the impact of welfare, the bombardment of sensationalism and soundbyte media, and the implosion of well-paying manufacturing jobs.

The odds against the poor today are staggering, as the social, economic and educational disparities have only widened since the dawn of the information age in the 1960s. One-fourth of children under the age of six live in poverty, surviving on an income of around $15,000, or less, for a family of four.

And it ís not just a lack of money that keeps them down. Other realities have entered the picture. For example, the percentage of children who live with one parent has tripled since 1960. Couple that issue with a dramatic decrease in the size of immediate and extended families and a decline in cross-generational contacts. When you factor in a diminished social network and fewer institutions to provide positive gathering places for young people, you have a formula for despair, a condition in which people in the lower-income areas in our country can scarcely harbor a hope. It should come as no surprise that between 60 and 80 percent of our inner city youth are considered "seriously at risk," unlikely to make it through a productive adulthood.

Now the New Economy, made possible in large part by the Internet, arrives, creating an economic boom and enormous new wealth in our country that obscures these underlying and fundamental problems. Left to its natural evolution, the Internet will only lead to a further and more profound concentration of knowledge, wealth and power—leaving even further behind those who are less educated, less skilled and less connected.

Despite the effective work of countless groups and people, too many children simply will not have the opportunity to develop into adults who lead productive lives. The disparity in wealth and opportunity they face will perhaps be the widest of any point in the past 50 years. As the Internet closes the door of opportunity on those who don't know how to take advantage of what it has to offer, we will find ourselves in nearly the same place Addams was at the turn of the 20th century.

We have a remarkable opportunity to attack these problems that have plagued us for so long. But we must think in new ways, apply new approaches and do more to bring people and resources together to advance a common purpose—to help young people grow up with hope, personal responsibility and the opportunity to lead meaningful and productive lives. We must ensure that these young people avoid becoming the illiterate of the 21st century—not only unable to read or write which itself is a serious challenge, but unable to learn in a fast changing, adaptive world. It requires nothing short of a fundamental change in how we intervene, develop and educate young people.

I want to talk about several points today. First, we need to focus more attention on the role of out-of-school efforts at the community level. Through this channel we can begin to rethink the ways we can reach out to help children and their families at the times when they are often most vulnerable. We must seek ways to be substantially more effective and scalable with these efforts—and by scalable I mean capable of multiplying their impact many times over. Second, I want to discuss the new problem solving dynamics presented by the Internet and the ways that this communications medium can play a role in rethinking how we work with children, especially those in low-income areas. In this

way, efforts to help young people can be more broad-based and transformative. Finally, I want to suggest some concrete ways we might think about taking advantage of all that the Internet offers—knowledge, relationships and resources—to strengthen out-of-school assistance and enable communities to achieve meaningful change.

But before I go further, let me explain why I care so intensely. At a time when our country needs to heal our communities, create more skilled workers and find new ways to solve long-standing problems, we run the risk of being unable to benefit from the minds of many young people, who, if given the chance, can make positive contributions.   I'd like to explain what I mean by way of a personal story.

In 1943, a boy was born into a family of western Pennsylvania coal miners who later moved to one of the ethnic neighborhoods of Cleveland. The boy's family never had much money, but never considered themselves poor. To get by, his dad sold vacuum sweepers door-to-door and his mom cleaned offices and houses. The child was much loved and cared for by his parents, brother and sister, and warmly embraced by numerous aunts and uncles and cousins.

The local school was a safe harbor for the boy and his teachers were good. Whenever possible, he played ball—at public rec centers, the nearby YMCA and in neighborhood parks and hoop courts. Enveloped in love and grounded in support from those who believed in him, the boy always felt "he could."

Let's fast forward to the present, some 40 years later. The streets are more ominous—many of the shops have closed. Jobs in the steel mills and factories have disappeared for many. The rec center has been torn down, the library is gone and the Y is a shell of what it once was. An empty lot stands in place of the Catholic school. The public school has suffered over the years, although there are those committed to improving it. What promise does life hold for the young people in this neighborhood, compared to that the child enjoyed forty years earlier?

That boy is me. The things that made my life rich and the support that meant so much—a close, extended family whose values infused everything we did, the safe and nurturing places where my friends and I learned and played, and the mentors we found along the way—have almost vanished in my old neighborhood, and in many such places today. I am able to stand here today, because I was given the chance, the encouragement and the needed resources in my time. How do we help ensure that today's children are given the same?

Altering the Ways of Working with Youth

Strong families, good schools, quality out-of-school programs, effective community-based groups and cohesive neighborhoods all provide a web of support for young people. But in so many areas today, this web of support—what we once called community—is frail for some, nonexistent for others. Severe unemployment, cutbacks in social services, the breakdown of the family, drugs, violence and inadequate schools have all contributed to the decline, as it did where I grew up.

How do we channel the resources needed to help young people cope and what do we do to raise their sense of what's possible so they might achieve more meaningful lives?

Professor Howard Gardner from the Harvard Graduate School of Education once noted that although we may believe that our schools have failed us, we need to consider whether the breakdown of our communities failed our schools. Strengthening our educational system must be a top priority; there can be no question about that. But, as Gardner suggests, we must also help strengthen our communities.

One way is through out-of-school assistance, which can offer everything from formal out-of-school academic programs to healthcare, to athletic and musical activities to engage young people. Together, these various forms of assistance begin to reconstruct community. In particular, out-of-school learning programs have shown great promise.

Reginald Clark, an educational researcher, found that one predictor of success in school was whether a young person spent 25 to 35 hours a week engaged in "constructive learning," whether leisure reading and writing, music, chores or problem-solving games. In contrast, he found young people who engaged in passive recreation, such as watching television or "hanging out," were often underachievers in school. Government studies have supported these findings and law enforcement authorities have called for greater support of out-of-school programs because crime, violence and substance abuse all increase once school lets out.

Community-based groups, comprised of nonprofits, religious groups, neighborhood centers and libraries, as well as schools that are open to their neighborhoods, have incorporated these programs. Over the past decade they have expanded as the recognition of their success has grown. Although we should applaud and support this work, we also must think how it can become substantially more effective and brought to scale to reach many more young people.

Community-based groups provide a good foundation—people who care, who provide love and emotional support, who have the skills and knowledge to work with and help young people and who demonstrate success. But what can be done to help them build on this foundation to increase their capacity to reach more children effectively so that they strengthen and develop their management and staff, become more aware of each other's work, learn to adapt the successes of others and better find the resources they need?

The Internet as a Means to Change

Here is where the Internet comes in. In the hands of people who genuinely care about and know how to help children, the Internet can be used as a means to develop new and better ways to increase effectiveness and bring successful efforts to scale. It can enhance and strengthen the work of community-based organizations by redefining relationships, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and increasing interaction among community-based groups and their constituencies—young people and families, government services, youth service providers, funders and the business community. It can be applied to help coalesce resources and benefit from the collective intelligence of people around vital issues. And furthermore, it can be leveraged to help change the way we think about helping young people, leading to new solutions to problems.

More than anything, the Internet is about people and the ways we interact to exchange knowledge and experience. The Internet enables us to be much more effective in these relationships because we can tap many more people, and the right people, quickly.

Consider the benefits for a child suffering from a serious disease who can visit ConvoNation < http://www.convonation.org/>, a Web site that provides a virtual hangout for children who are disabled or sick. Often isolated, they are able to interact directly with other young people suffering from similar afflictions. They are able to share their fears with someone who understands and learn how others their age are coping. Imagine being able to find ways to help a child with a learning disability through a simple online exchange with the child's mother, teacher and several specialists. And in education, the Internet is being applied to change the very methods of acquiring knowledge by putting more resources in the hands of students, emphasizing self-learning, group collaboration and knowledge sharing.

As Professor Mark Edmunson of the University of Virginia recently wrote in the *New York Times* magazine, "Regardless of where they live or what their life circumstances are, students could have access to the best courses, call forth lectures by the best professors and do what all students need eventually learn to do: educate themselves."

The real power of the Internet is people as the ultimate source of knowledge. It is not the computers, the physical mass of wires, the complex networks or the vast databases of information. Rather, it is people and their knowledge, relationships, insights and spirit, freely passed from one to another, who engender the magic of this interconnected world. Only when we see the Internet as a new medium, enabling people and community groups to empower themselves in new ways, does it offer the potential we are proposing.

Changing How We Help Young People with the Internet

The Internet can be applied to transform out-of-school assistance as profoundly as it has commerce, finance, education and healthcare, where the dramatic changes are really only beginning. But, there are serious impediments to overcome in lower-income areas and the change will prove much slower and more arduous.

We recently started to work with four community-based organizations in the District to help them integrate the Internet into their out-of-school programs for children, ages 6-13. Although we've just begun, these organizations are already experiencing a change in the way they are thinking about what the Internet means in their work. They might have started with a sense that this was about plugging in PCs and teaching technical skills, but they are increasingly realizing it's about their own organizational capacity building—staff development, technical infrastructure, support, training and the very way that their organizations function. It is slowly influencing the way they work, and it is clearly expanding their view of what is needed and possible.

As the lead executive of one of the organizations exclaimed after seeing some rather advanced Internet applications for young people, "I'm now beginning to understand how much our children are missing and how they really will be left behind unless we can do much more." If they can see this change within the first year, imagine what might occur over the next few.

Ultimately, we envision an online learning community in which people working with children and youth are brought together through the use of the Internet. It starts with email. A youth worker in Oakland emails another in DC to start a dialogue among the children in their groups about their neighborhoods. A staff member running an out-of-school learning program links to the school attended by the children in her program. By the click of a mouse or an email, she can stay abreast of the academic programs and complement the school's efforts.

In the same way, teachers can more readily stay in touch with their students and families outside the classroom, exchanging suggestions and advice. People working directly with young people in out-of-school programs can more easily and effectively access local healthcare and human services resources, the police and the courts, when timing is so critical. The Internet can be used to help break down the compartmentalization that so often inhibits the holistic support young people require.   Simply put, the Internet can help improve these types of communications, but it also makes them practical or often even possible.

When organizations begin to use the Internet, the very dynamic of the organization begins to change. It can change the way the organization interacts with outside collaborators and constituents and how they interact with one another.   Managers in community-based groups can conduct business online with government services much more efficiently, freeing up valuable time. They can more effectively engage funders, supporters and their boards, when and as they wish, by email or through a Web site. Having this immediate link with their stakeholders also makes them more accountable, since one can immediately connect online to view their work. Programs for youth, neighborhood efforts, capital campaigns, small fundraisers or the development of a new policy or initiative could all benefit.

The National Adoption Center's FACES of Adoption program < http://adopt.org/> is a dramatic example of how an organization can become more effective and scale its efforts. It has already significantly raised public awareness of children awaiting adoption by providing over the Internet a computerized photo-list of children throughout the country who await adoptive homes, as well as a wealth of adoption-related information at their Web site.

Staff can better develop their skills by working with people and tapping resources and programs when they need to and when they have time. And young people can develop critical skills in research, evaluation and collaboration; find a means for discovery and creativity; and learn the skills required for occupations that did not exist five years ago. More importantly, they can develop learning relationships, in person and online, with adults and other young people who provide a critical support network—now and for years to come.

And, they have a reach well beyond the confines of their neighborhoods. Like a young student at John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring who reached me with an email to ask if I would come to speak to her class, young people can speak first-hand to one another and adults from other cultures, countries or just other neighborhoods.

What does it mean for a sixth grader in an isolated neighborhood to hear the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. come alive as she clicks on a line in a speech and then shares her reaction with an adult who lived in these times? What is the impact of seeing moments in history or distant places over the Internet and then being able to discuss them with an historian, a recent visitor and other young people who share the same curiosity? This is about learning and learning relationships—maybe not always to an academic benchmark, but certainly to the standard of life. It is about learning to learn.

Within an enriched learning environment and with the guidance of adults or other youth, young people can gain a sense of accomplishment, a better sense of self-worth and confidence and a more positive attitude toward learning. We find that young people pick up this new type of learning quite quickly, and, as they grow, they can help other young people and adults learn about this new world, becoming the real agents of change.

The traditional gatekeepers who have tried to control the flow of information—"the conveyers of knowledge," as Edmunson calls them—will be undermined. And in their place, adult guides, who can provide children a sense of right or wrong while helping them develop learning skills, will become prevalent.

These examples are but tiny kernels in a far more sweeping transformation—one which gains power as more people link up and incorporate the Internet into their work. But it is not out of reach. It will, however, be a formidable challenge to achieve. We must ensure that the actions we take and the investments we make provide the foundation for change.

How Do We Make This Happen?

We must keep uppermost in our minds that the goal of these efforts is to meet the needs of young people. We must support out-of-school assistance and encourage and champion those who can and want to help young people. The challenge is to help those who work with young people gain the requisite vision and understanding to enable them and their community-based organizations to integrate the Internet into their efforts and, in turn, unlock their own potential to help young children even more.

The challenge is not the Internet and its related technology, although it is certainly an essential and formidable prerequisite to the transformative change that the Internet can enable. Rather, it is recognizing leadership, building organizational capacity, changing the incentives for collaboration within nonprofit groups, bypassing the territorial control of existing institutions, rehabbing dysfunctional physical facilities and infrastructure, recruiting a remarkably scarce talent into this field, facing the life-cycle cost of

technology, and overcoming discouraging neighborhood forces that may undermine young people seeking to improve their lives.

And, this challenge includes advancing the mindset of traditional funding sources— national nonprofits, regional intermediaries and coalitions, and the systems including K-12, family support and child protection—that both support and limit the work of community-based groups. Attitudes need to be changed, minds opened and trust created.

Here then are eight suggestions that can help our region realize the potential to change the lives of young people by cultivating a learning community focused on out-of-school assistance.

1. **Create a Critical Mass.** Get people connected and comfortable with the Internet. We often forget that we need to connect people to the Internet, not just buildings and institutions, to realize the real benefit. It is essential that the leaders, managers and staff involved with out-of-school assistance efforts get connected to the Internet, for they represent the beginnings of a network. This network can evolve to an online community of people coming together around the common purpose of helping young people. And, we need to get young people online, too, for they are a great resource and contributor to help themselves and other young people. Once this critical mass builds, then the benefits will multiply exponentially.

2. **Influence Funding Levels and Focus.** Help funders and financial advisors better understand the importance of the Internet to the future of community-based groups and the young people they help and be more willing to support the organizational capacity building of these groups. Such an outcome might also refocus the use of funds so that for every investment in the Internet and related technology, 70% of the allotted monies would be devoted to people and process development and 30% to acquire the hardware and software.

3. **Invest in Out-of-School Learning Programs.** We want to encourage out-of-school assistance on many fronts, for simply providing young people safe havens with positive engaging activities is an important benefit. But we must push for enriched learning environments in community-based groups that promote developmental activities through relationships with adults and other young people. These out-of-school learning programs will be best situated if they exist as an important part of an integrated set of services to help young people—recognizing the importance of leadership, education, health, athletics, conflict resolution and family support.

4. **Integrate Families and Adults into Learning Programs.** Every reasonable effort should be made to integrate parents, family members and other caring adults into these enriched learning environments and programs. We should draw on the resources of existing programs to bring young people and their families together to learn. If existing programs can't facilitate this kind of learning, then new efforts should be initiated. And, we must help prepare community-based groups that may have traditionally focused on children to more effectively encourage parental and family involvement.

5. **Build Networked Learning Centers Where the Impact Will be Greatest.** Establish networked learning centers to provide a framework to integrate the Internet into out-of-school learning programs. These centers, led by full-time well trained staff with computers connected via a high-speed access to the Internet, clear a path to the world beyond to enrich learning environments for children and youth. Build these centers within community-based groups that can yield the greatest benefit. Initial efforts should focus on making a relatively few efforts highly effective; otherwise, we run the risk of diluting investments and resources.

6. **Invest in Building Organizational Capacity.** We need leaders who understand the potential and threats posed by the Internet, its implications and costs, and the way it can be used to build their organizational capacity. We need to foster an appreciation for effective management practices and the continuing investment in staff development. Improved organizational capacity should yield higher quality programs for young people and their families, develop better trained staff, improve cost effectiveness, accelerate the development and delivery of new programs and realize increased funding. In turn, this should translate to more young people growing up to lead meaningful and productive lives.

7. **Provide Internet Infrastructure Support.** We need to create resources to help community-based leaders and organizations understand, manage and benefit from the Internet most effectively. These resources should include an Internet Academy that would provide programs to develop leaders, management and staff of community-based groups to better understand the potential, risks, implications and pitfalls that the Internet poses for the young people they serve and for their organizations. We need to create an Internet Resource Center that, as a central resource within the region, would provide a continuum of services from purchasing and installing PCs to the total outsourcing of technology services for community-based groups. And, finally, we need to develop an online resources network through which community-based leaders could locate and secure resources from Internet

product and service providers, the business community, learning institutions and other nonprofits.

8. **Support and Leverage the Educational System.** It is important that community-based out-of-school programs work with the K-12 schools in their neighborhood—and that the schools reciprocate. The networked learning centers in these community-based groups should be valuable resources and models for K-12 schools and, once connected via the Internet, communication among teachers, community workers, children and families can be greatly improved. As a critical mass begins to function as an online learning community, the development and intervention to help young people can become more effective, more frequent and more timely. And, this online community can expand to include the faculty and students in colleges, universities and other K-12 schools and learning institutions to benefit from the wealth of their experiences, gaining access to their growing base of online academic curricula and learning programs.

Conclusion

This agenda is aggressive. But striving for anything less would ignore the fact that dramatic change—prodded and accelerated by the Internet—is coming into the lives of youth and those who work with them in the same way it has to other sectors of our society. It's coming with wonderful new opportunities, yet it is introducing new threats and responsibilities as well.

When the Internet first began to show its potential, many in the business world ignored it as a passing fad that would not affect them. Now, many of those companies—even multi-billion dollar companies with global names—are madly trying to catch up with a process that has altered markets and created new competitors overnight. Its impact is rippling across various industries, but competitiveness and the need to survive have been driving this change.

In the nonprofit world and, more specifically, in the world of community-based groups providing vital out-of-school assistance, it's unclear what force will drive such change. Will it be a sea change in philanthropy? Will it be driven by the transformation of government services? Or might it be as simple as knowledge from within as people begin to understand the power of the Internet to change their own lives? We don't know what or when.

 We know, however, that this dramatic change is coming. And, by recent accounts, when it hits, it will come with an alarming swiftness. Why not capture this profound

development and mold it to an advantage? Why wait for it to consume our children in a cyberfunk, while the adults in their lives remain clueless, unable to provide much needed guidance? Why wait for it to sweep over and leave community-based organizations in crisis, playing catch-up with a development that will have long passed them by?

If the Internet's potential can be tapped, community-based groups can help empower themselves. They, in turn, can redefine and improve the way they fulfill their mission. And the improvements they demonstrate can affect other institutions. Collectively, we can strengthen all the elements that support young people. To focus on technology is to think incrementally. To focus on enabling people and organizations to empower themselves can be nothing less than a transformation in the way they work and think.

How transformative? The International Campaign to Ban Land Mines did the unthinkable by gaining a broad-based level of cooperation between non-governmental organizations and traditional diplomats in the face of insurmountable opposition. Behind the scenes, the powers of the Internet were at work as it helped facilitate this unprecedented global movement in which a utopian vision became a treaty, signed in the lightning speed of five years. In the process, the U.S. government was challenged and the effort was recognized with a Nobel Peace Prize.

Imagine this potential in the hands of Jane Addams. A century ago, Addams was one of the forerunners of a movement that continues to this day—providing a comprehensive suite of services to young people in low-income neighborhoods. She also recognized the crucial benefits—personal, emotional and for the good of a democratic society—we all get by doing this work.

As the 21st century nears, we have a powerful new means at hand, one which could fundamentally alter the course of youth development, intervention and education. One that can help make our young people more effective in a learning economy and society. I suspect that if Addams were here she would see the potential of the Internet. I think she would see how it would help extend the success she had, reaching many more young people, and, perhaps, helping to turn that disturbing tide of disparity that leaves so many behind.

We have to ensure that young people today have, at least, the chance that I and others like me had some 40 years ago while we ensure they are literate in the ways of the 21st century.