



**The Community Foundation of Tompkins County, Triad Foundation, Inc.,
and the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI)
“Connecting School and Community”
A Critical Issues Roundtable and Workshop
April 15, 2004**

The April 15 Critical Issues Roundtable, co-hosted by the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, Triad Foundation, and the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) was a great success. Attending the workshop were 150 community representatives and the discussion was energetic and highly productive.

Framing the Discussion: How We Define the Opportunities

Connecting School and Community involves a broad range of opportunities and potential activities. Through interviews in the community over the past few months, IPEI identified four priority topics to be the focus of the evening’s discussion: *partnerships between organizations/institutions and the public schools; after-school programs; volunteers in the schools; and families as partners.*

As part of the pre-evening preparation, participants were also asked to consider ways that school-community connections might make a difference to our schools and the youth of our community. In doing this, participants were asked to consider these ideas in the context of various student segments: *students who are struggling (emotionally, academically, socially); high achievers needing enrichment; all students “in the middle;” pre-school readiness; and students working and serving in the community.* Participants were asked to indicate their preferences for a topic and then were seated accordingly upon their arrival.

To open the workshop, **Dr. Bill Russell**, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum in the Ithaca City School District (ICSD), invited participants to become fully engaged in the topics at hand and to be assured that results of the evening’s discussion would be welcomed by ICSD as ideas, collaborations, and opportunities to deepen and extend the school-community connections. On behalf of Dr. Judith Pastel, who could not attend because of illness, Dr. Russell briefly shared what the schools are currently doing, the needs that remain unmet, the hope that the evening’s discussion would yield new pathways to partnerships, and the confidence that IPEI is poised to take immediate leadership responsibility for the projects that would result from this effort.

To frame the four priority areas for group discussions were four educational leaders in our community.

- **Dr. Pat Tempesta**, Outreach Director for the Center for Teacher Education at Ithaca College, defined what partnerships can mean between institutions and public schools and shared information about the existing school-community partnerships Ithaca College already has underway with the South Hill Elementary School here in Ithaca and with the Frederick Douglass Academy in East Harlem.
- **Jamie Thomas**, Assistant Principal, DeWitt Middle School/ICSD, presented information on the importance of after-school programs enhancing a student’s experience, what existing options already exist within ICSD, what needs also exist, and how the community might respond.

- **Holly Kazarinoff** of BOCES focused on how volunteers can be especially helpful in school-community partnerships and explained the role BOCES plays in helping area schools with volunteer management, training, and coordination, thereby heightening awareness among workshop participants of what a valuable resource BOCES is to our community.
- **Cal Walker**, co-founder of The Village at Ithaca and Associate Director of the Learning Strategies at Cornell University, defined *families as partners* and the importance of the consistency of family support programs through all the changes and transitions students face in their school journey. Cal shared the inspiring story of The Village at Ithaca as recognized as a valuable model, which focuses on helping minority students meet diverse educational and personal needs

Results of the General Discussion and Next Steps

Participants engaged in small-group discussions focused on the four priority areas, taking special care to focus on identifying strategies that will strengthen and extend the opportunities for community-school connections. Each group was also asked to identify who might lead or take responsibility for each recommendation.

By evening's end, as groups reported on their discussions, several general consensus points emerged:

- the realization that existing transportation issues for students limit community-school partnerships at present and might require a Gadabout for Youth;
- the need for an identified communications system and clearinghouse mechanism (database, paid coordinator, matching and scheduling system) to foster overall coordination for further developing opportunities for linking schools to community resources and partners;
- the great enthusiasm, energy, wisdom, and willingness community participants were bringing to this discussion and the realization that there are extensive resources people can offer as a part of their personal or professional constituencies (businesses, special interests/expertise, willingness to help gather others and leverage financial resources, and readiness to lead, as appropriate);
- the awareness of existing partnerships already in place within our community (Village at Ithaca, FreeBay, It Takes All of Us, Community Read for Elementary Kids, New Visions, and more) that offer models for further replication or adaptation;
- the need for more accessible and diverse after-school programs and the realization that a number of these will not require extensive financial resources to activate; and
- the need to strengthen and broaden communication networks between schools and community partners so that the community-at-large can become more involved and know how to help in appropriate ways while the schools can also know *how to respond* when opportunities arise.

Many other ideas were also mentioned.

All participants were asked to complete a follow-up form indicating several things: the most promising opportunities they had heard for linking schools and communities *and* how they would personally be prepared or willing to help. Of the 150 participants, 107 responded to these questions. Of the respondents, over 80 people volunteered to help with next steps and many focused on the following ideas as having the most promise:

- mentoring programs or "life coaching" networks for students and their families, using the Village at Ithaca model already in place;
- a user-friendly and highly accessible network of clearinghouse options;
- communication venues that would encourage broader understanding and participation from the community perspective and also from the schools' perspectives;
- ideas for how existing cultural and educational organizations outside the schools can be exciting partners in collaborations; and
- ways to involve youth actively in establishing the partnerships that will emerge as a follow-up to this discussion..

Notable in the recommendations was the fact that two items “more money” and “more people were not defined as insurmountable *barriers* or *hurdles* to be overcome *before* any action could be taken. The spirit of the discussion was “Let’s find a way to bring people with all kinds of resources together with people or systems in need and figure out how to get things done most effectively.” At evening’s end participants were energized and excited about the next steps emerging from their conversations.

Next Steps

Community involvement in public education is vital to the quality of our public schools and an important investment in our community’s ongoing vitality. IPEI is reviewing all the information generated from the April 15 community workshop. Within a few weeks IPEI will be defining ways to involve the 80 or more people who volunteered to help and will also be focusing on both short-term and long-range areas of emphases to pursue. For Triad Foundation and the Community Foundation, the information generated from this roundtable has provided great insights about how important those who live and work in Ithaca consider their public school system and to what ends they are willing to go to make partnerships for schools, our community, our youth, and our families possible.

Summary and Thanks to All

The Critical Issues Roundtables represent a series of community-focused conversations hosted by the Community Foundation in its role as convener and catalyst for exploring unmet needs and community-wide opportunities. Critical Issues Roundtables are intended to be provocative conversations that lead to action, produce more effective strategic decision-making and planning practices, promote positive results for our communities, and foster enlightened philanthropy. The Community Foundation invites other foundations and organizations to co-host these meetings as a means of promoting partnerships, fostering collaborative efforts, and identifying the natural leaders who are prepared to pursue the results/next steps emanating from the discussions. Consistent with these roles, Triad Foundation, Inc. has held a significant interest and commitment to education for people of all ages, and IPEI serves as the leading advocate for public education in Ithaca. IPEI is positioned to manage the opportunities stemming from this roundtable. As partners, we all value the impact of education on our community’s quality of life.

On behalf of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, Triad Foundation, and IPEI, we thank all who participated in this roundtable about *Connecting School and Community*. The roundtable workshop was highly productive and will lead to great progress in increasing community involvement in our public schools.

Vital to this community conversation was a dedicated Planning Team whose work spanned many months and whose wisdom identified the main discussion points. These people were: Terry Byrnes, *President of IPEI*; Eric Clay, *Chair, Grants and Roundtable Committee, Community Foundation*; Craig Evans, *Special Assistant to the Superintendent/ICSD*; Joanne V. Florino, *Executive Director, Triad Foundation*; Jeff Furman, *Founder of It Takes All of Us*; Peg Hendricks, *Executive Director, Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; Holly Kazarinoff, *BOCES*; Judy Pastel, *Superintendent, ICSD*; Katy Pearce, *IPEI Board member*; Bill Russell, *Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, ICSD*; Gary Stewart, *Assistant Director, Office of Community Affairs, Cornell University*; Pat Tempesta, *Outreach Director, Center for Teacher Education, Ithaca College*; Jamie Thomas, *Assistant Principal, DeWitt Middle School, ICSD*; Vally Kovary, *Principal, International Planning Associates*; and Cal Walker, *Co-founder of The Village at Ithaca and Associate Director, Learning Strategies Center, Cornell University*.

In addition, special thanks to those who served as facilitators and scribes for each table's discussion: Wendy Bakal, *Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; Charles Bartosch, *ICSD Board member*; Barbara Bauer, *Co-founder, Why Wait*; Charles Brodhead, *IPEI Board member*; Jennifer Engel, *IPEI Board member*; Sue Eyester, *IPEI volunteer*; Mary Grainger, *IPEI Board member*; John Hinchcliff, *Chair of the Board, Community Foundation of Tompkins County and IPEI Board member*; Brigid Hubberman, *Executive Director, Family Reading Partnership*; David Lee, *IPEI volunteer*; Ellen Morris-Knowler, *It Takes All of Us*; Patti Nozell, *IPEI Board member*; Deborah O'Connor, *ICSD Board member*; Sandy True, *IPEI Board member*; Jason Trumble, *Associate Principal, Boynton Middle School, ICSD*.