Enhancing Personalized Learning With Community Inputs
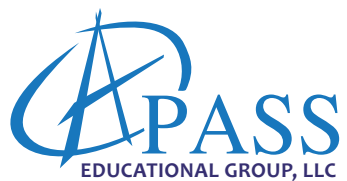
by Robert Weisser

All schools are connected to wider communities. There is the physical community within walking distance; the academic community of nearby colleges and other learning institutions; and the online community of interests that stretches around the world. It makes sense for schools to participate in these communities by encouraging people outside the schools to work with the students inside them.

Mentors

One such crossover opportunity takes advantage of community members with the time and inclination to mentor students. Mentoring usually involves a one-to-one, supportive relationship between a student and a trusted adult or older student, and has been linked with improved connection to school and higher achievement (Pannoni, 2015). Mentors meet regularly with students, and might help them with schoolwork, encourage them to get more from their education, help them adjust to life events, or introduce them to useful connections for college or career.

Many school districts have mentor groups that draw membership from the local community and businesses. Community members may be matched to students by interest, age, occupation, or expertise. The mentors provide students with different, more seasoned perspectives on the subjects they are studying, helping students "see into the future" by

showing them how their studies can impact their adult lives.

Adults may also be introduced into the school day as professional experts on what students are learning. For example, a professional book editor or writer might participate in a language arts class to show students how to write in a vibrant, evocative style. A research biologist might be engaged to demonstrate how the lab work that students do relates to the work done in professional laboratories. And an elevator installer might relate personal knowledge of wiring schematics and computer relays to students learning about electricity. Although students' impressions of such sessions may vary, at the least they will have the answer to the question: "When will I ever use this subject after I graduate?"

Work Experience and Internships

High school students can benefit from work-experience and internship programs, which allow them to apply the skills and knowledge they acquired in school to career situations. Schools partner with nearby businesses, hospitals, and government agencies for student shadow days during which students interested in all facets of the business shadow employees as they work. This lets students see firsthand the skills and qualities required for jobs that interest them while giving them the chance to figure out what they need to do in school to prepare for such careers. Students typically must complete a follow-up report and work with their teachers to cement their learning.

At Baldwin Senior High School in Baldwin, New York, students can also avail themselves of a

Senior Internship Program. This is a one-credit independent, non-paid internship experience linking students' interests and preferences to career and research exploration (Baldwin Schools, 2015). The course, which includes 80 hours of work experience at an approved professional site, enables students to discover the right college major and learn how to make the most of a workplace experience. In addition to the sitework, students learn research, resume writing, interviewing, and presentation skills. The program culminates in an end-of-year student presentation before the School-to-Work committee.

The World Beyond

Although many students—especially those in cities—might not recognize it, their schools are embedded in the natural community as well. Teachers of all grades can take advantage of the world outside the classroom window to teach and reinforce multiple skills.

For example, students at Los Angeles County's Leo Politi Elementary encounter native plants and animals as soon as they walk out the school door. Grant money from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and enthusiastic environmental students from a nearby high school replaced a section of the urban school's concrete play yard with a 5,000-square-foot garden. Students study the plants that grow in the garden and the animals that visit it, and use the data for a multitude of projects in various disciplines. Since the garden has been open, the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on annual science tests has increased 600 percent because the children are able to observe and write about the world outside (Curtis, 2016).

Copious lesson plans exist for such study. One source is the weekly Learning Network published by *The New York Times,* which features engaging, hands-on academic activities. One of them, titled "Backyard Science: Tallying Local Species to Learn About Diversity," is just such a plan to take advantage of natural settings readily available to a school. Students work together to conduct species tallies, document findings with photographs and videos, and create maps to summarize their results (Cutraro & Schulten, 2012).

Combining up-close nature study with online capabilities increases student engagement and understanding. The Smithsonian's eMammal project gets students to use motion-detection cameras to catch wildlife (or domestic pets) moving around the school's neighborhood and then transmit their observations to scientists (Smithsonian Institution, 2015):

> The system is designed for scientists and citizen scientists, and anyone who wants to join in the fun and discovery of camera trapping. Professional and volunteer camera trappers use our software to look at pictures, identify animals, and upload them to the Smithsonian Data Repository for review and storage. These data are useful for addressing important scientific and conservation questions, and the pictures provide a unique view into the hidden world of wildlife.

Global Connections

There are myriad opportunities to safely extend students' online reach worldwide. The first place

to investigate might be the US Department of Education, which maintains a list of such global collaboration forums on its website (http://www.ed.gov/). Some of these links are to commercial sites, others are to programs run by US government departments that promote international understanding, and still others are programs originating in other countries.

Depending on the program, students would have the opportunity to interact directly with students from other countries. A class may join a conversation with a foreign class (or several classes) about common issues, or could even collaborate on an extended project with the other groups. They might use videoconferencing, chat areas, or email to exchange information. In many cases, built-in language translation is available.

The possibilities of such collaboration are greater than simple cultural interchange. Students in foreign classrooms often have a different perspective on everyday academic subjects than do US students. For instance, a middle-school science class that is studying the environment in cool, relatively wet Seattle would be able to compare notes with a class in Senegal, which is the semi-arid Sahel region of Africa. Students on both ends would learn about the different climate priorities and policies in other regions, and how one solution halfway around the world might impact themselves.

Conclusion

Joining with community resources gives schools a greater ability to meet students where they are in their educational needs and to give them experience in life situations that will make them college and career ready. This encourages students to use what they learn in school to expand their intellectual horizons, placing them on the path toward greater personal engagement in their education and higher achievement in their classes.

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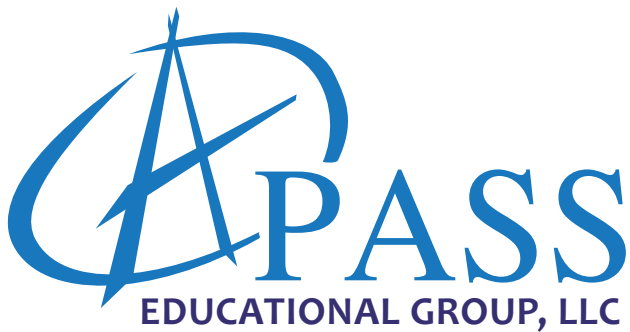
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