

“We must fundamentally change the relationship between communities and schools in order to strengthen public schools.”

How can we reconnect our communities and schools?

Reconnecting Communities and Schools is based on a simple idea: we must fundamentally change the relationship between communities and public schools in order to strengthen public schools and create the kind of community we seek.

We all know that schools will succeed only if they are *part* of the community. And we also know there are some things that only parents, coaches, civic groups, faith-based organizations, neighbors and others can do for our kids.

Changing the relationship will take hard work. For it is as much about how we conduct ourselves in public life as it is about our schools. It will take getting away from finger-pointing, endless complaint sessions, and hearing only from the squeaky wheels. Putting an end to people operating like consumers in public life — sitting back and making demands and claims. It will also take schools listening. Hearing different perspectives and ideas.

There is a need to fundamentally change the relationship between communities and schools, which will require that we learn to focus and act on the deep aspirations that people hold, aspirations that are too often lost in these topsy-turvy times.



New Guiding Principles

Let's move from being “consumers” of public education to “citizens.” We must shift our frame of reference from “What are *you* (the schools) going to do?” to “What are *we* going to do?”

Authenticity is crucial. Our work to reconnect communities and schools must adhere to a principle of being authentic — genuinely engaging people in conversation, listening, acting with a sense of true purpose and direction.

We must renew a sense of possibility. We must begin by tapping into people's aspirations for their community and public education, not their fears and complaints, and then create small steps of progress that help people build trust that change is possible.

New social covenants must be forged. *Everyone* needs to take a more active role in moving their schools and community forward. But to do that we must determine what people are willing to do and under what conditions. Just who is responsible for what?

Embracing public accountability is key. To reconnect communities and schools, we must account for ourselves — what we say, what we do, how we do it. That's key to changing the relationship.

“This is a call for action.

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For it is as much about how we conduct ourselves in public life as it is about our schools.”



**RECONNECTING
COMMUNITIES
AND SCHOOLS**

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Reconnecting
Communities
and
Schools



“The Reconnecting process gave me a sense of hope that things can change, that our schools and our community can be better places for everybody to live.”

Here's how This Initiative Unfolds

Start-up. In each school district, local steering committees organize and run the Reconnecting work. The steering committees are made up of business leaders, educators, citizens, community leaders and other folks. Together, these folks bring a range of voices and perspectives to the table.

Community Engagement. Central to *Reconnecting Communities and Schools* is the community engagement process.

- **Open Meetings.** Meetings across the community provide an opportunity for people to talk about what is important to them about their communities and public schools. These meetings introduce the initiative and are a down payment that public business will be conducted differently.
- **Community Conversations.** A cross-section of citizens, educators, business leaders and community leaders participate in a series of highly-focused community conversations about people's aspirations for their communities and schools — wrestling with underlying issues, seeing new possibilities, and striking compacts — which lead to a new kind of action.
- **Our Agreement.** The community conversations produce an agreement on steps to reconnect their communities and public schools. It is a compact, or covenant, outlining what the community and schools are willing to do to make progress.

Taking Public Action. In this phase, the initiative acts as a catalyst to spark the diffusion of the agreement throughout the community. Creating a civic brigade — a core group of citizens, leaders, educators and organizations — taking action to make progress on the agreement.

Sustaining and Accountability. *Reconnecting Communities and Schools* takes a long-term view; after all, change will not occur overnight. The Harwood Institute provides materials on how to sustain this effort over time, including guidelines for how to look for new education challenges to apply this process as well as to other pressing issues in the community.

Reconnecting Forum. The Reconnecting Forum builds a network of people committed specifically to reconnecting communities and schools. At the Forum, people learn about Harwood principles for community engagement, create new or strengthen existing ideas for moving their communities forward, and build a statewide network of supporters and innovators.



In Your Community, Across America

Reconnecting Communities and Schools is focused on your community, but it is also part of something much bigger — a national initiative starting to spread across America.

As part of this national initiative, The Harwood Institute will connect fellow travelers building better communities for education.

Just one example of how this is done is through The Harwood Institute's **Education Working Group**, which offers people from Reconnecting initiatives everywhere a forum for ideas, learning from each other's work and figuring out new ways to move forward.

Education Working Group members also learn more about how to grow a community's strength, how to improve public life and politics, and what it means to re-strike social covenants around important public issues in people's daily lives.

Harwood Portable Tools for Reconnecting Schools and Communities

For communities that aren't yet ready for the sustained efforts of a full-fledged Reconnecting initiative, The Harwood Institute is developing a series of tools that can be starting points for working on the relationship between schools and communities.

- **Listening Educator Kit** — Provides skills and tools for talking with citizens, what to listen for, and how to use what you hear as part of a long-term relationship.
- **Community Conversation Kit** — Processes for community groups or informal citizen groups to hold conversations and take action. Builds a different kind of talk about schools rooted in aspirations, not demands and complaints.
- **Professionalism Bias Barometer** — Helps educators uncover and challenge perceptions they hold of the community and helps build a new perspective for working with the community.
- **Generating a New Public Story** — Contains tips to help educators, community groups and others tell an authentic story that captures people's imagination, that says change is possible, and that spreads the word about the good things already going on.