

How to Gain Community Support for your School

New projects inherently effect change to both school and community. Garnering support for your project can be a daunting task. In fact, statistics show that most projects initially have minimal support from community and school members. While some are in opposition, the vast majority (nearly 80%) is undecided, indifferent, or skeptical about your project. It is essential that you quickly and efficiently bring this silent majority into the fold to support your project.

Communication is the key to winning school and community support. All parties must be well informed and ideally part of the initial planning strategy. Communicate openly, honestly, and in a timely manner. Keep in mind that there are unlimited approaches to reaching varied groups of potential supporters. Encourage participation in the development of your project. The steps below will help you reach your project and funding goals:

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1. Form a Project Committee

Form a planning committee consisting of board members, teachers and academics; political and professional leaders; nonprofit agencies that are willing to support your project in writing; parents; and members of the general public to start building trust, understanding, and support for your project. Ideally, the committee will be familiar with your organization, project themes, or methods to be used to successfully complete the project. Select those who share common beliefs, goals, and a commitment to your project to ensure that your goals are fulfilled. Planning committee members may act as advisors assisting with an array of responsibilities from program development to evaluation.

Critically consider each committee member's strengths and weaknesses to determine how each individual may best be used to meet the short and long term goals of the project and ensure efficiency of project development. Select one key member to act as the project director who will assume the responsibility to inspire, coordinate, and document the project. Determine who will have active or passive roles in strategic planning, developing a list of potential organizations that might support your project, preparing written invitations to visit your school or requests for funding, and who will be responsible for public relations. Seek out other members if there is an area that remains unfulfilled.

Your project's success depends on the contributions of your many dedicated volunteers. The project committee must jointly take action to promote the project and see it through. Perhaps meet at least once a month to discuss and implement project strategies. Project members too busy to attend all meetings or events may make a valuable contribution by volunteering a special skill, service, or simply helping spread the word and raise awareness.

2. Garner Administrative Support

After you have formed a committee of individuals dedicated to your project, and before you start looking for support outside your school or district, be sure to first obtain administrative support. Schedule a meeting between your key project committee members and the key administrative personnel within your organization.

To prepare, create a 2-4 page project proposal. Include information such as project goals, need for your project, target audience, timelines, benefits and features, assessment, evaluation, and budget to inform and rally administrative support for your project. Make it easy to read and factual. Illustrate how you will fund the project initially, including any internal monetary contributions and/or in-kind support such as professional services, facilities, and equipment you will be seeking from administration, and how your project will be sustained long term, if applicable. Be sure to demonstrate how your project will benefit both school and community.

3. Involve the Community

Once you have administrative backing, it is time to seek external support. Invite the public to express its views and concerns about your project to enhance community support and ultimate success of the project. As project initiators, be prepared to listen to, respond to, and incorporate feedback given by community members.

If the community is reluctant to support your project, stand back and try to be objective. Ask yourself if you have provided enough information or is your timing off? Take advice from community members and let them know their input makes a difference. By allowing the community the chance to provide input, it will feel at least some ownership and ultimate pride in the project. Consider using effective strategies in communicating with the public and building support: informal consultation, use of media, open houses, reference centers, and public forums.

3.1. Informal Consultation

Keep in touch with key people in your community. Informally share ideas and gather input over the life of the project. Discussions may take place over coffee, over the phone, via email or Web blogs. Share your ideas, ask questions, explain the benefits of your project, and more importantly listen to respondents' ideas, questions,

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and suggestions. Open communication allows you to continually gauge community reactions and level of support.

3.2. Use of Media

People are often more motivated to ask questions and support a project when it has drawn media attention.

Once you have garnered basic community support, select a spokesperson responsible for sharing project information with the community and building a working relationship with the media. This committee member should be well informed and articulate to ensure a consistent, quality message. Your spokesperson will want to get to know local media contacts and what encourages them to cover your project. They will be responsible for organizing, writing, and printing informational brochures, newsletters, Web casts, public service announcements, and press releases highlighting project activities. Consider using a combination of approaches such as print and broadcast media, paid advertising on community television or radio stations and in local newspapers. The spokesperson may write and submit media releases featuring the benefits of the project to the community.

Keep in mind that those involved in the project should be well informed prior to any media releases. Always provide accurate and timely information and allow ample time for input. Be sure to provide a contact name and information about upcoming project activities.

3.3. Open Houses

When you consider the members of your community you will notice parents of current students that are either active or may rarely be in contact with your school; parents of past students who no longer feel like they need to or welcome to visit or contact the school; and those who may have never had children enrolled in your school and/or are new to your community. It is reasonable to presume that not everyone in the community feels free to drop in to share their ideas and opinions. It is up to you to encourage their participation and to generate physical exposure and awareness.

Give them a reason and an invitation and they will come. Invite the community in for first hand look at a classroom, your library, recreation areas, and performing arts facilities. Encourage students to demonstrate projects they have been working on. Provide a sneak peek at programs you wish to integrate into your curriculum. Educate the community with informational brochures and exhibits; entertain them with music and activities. Open houses are excellent ways to build good relationships with the community served by the school. It's an opportunity to present a more complete picture of what really goes on at your school and how they may be able to support you. Show them what's behind those closed doors to build a positive, productive relationship.

Make it a point to issue special VIP invitations to people and organizations that have been critical or reluctant to support past projects. Let them know they will receive personal attention, guided tours, and special seating. Whether they come or not, the gesture will be remembered.

3.4. Reference Centers

People appreciate being able to easily locate and access accurate and current project information. Consider making reference materials available at your school and/or district. Also other locations, such as your public library, grocery stores, town and/or county offices, community and senior centers, on the Internet, and other central locations. Be certain information includes contact name(s) and phone number(s) and is always kept up to date.

3.5. Public Forums

Once the community is informed about your project and if there are still concerns, consider a public forum. This will give participants the opportunity to address project concerns, provide input regarding alternatives, and help eliminate any existing roadblocks. Everyone should receive a chance to be heard. The open forum is a precursor to meaningful discussion, building trust, and understanding among interested parties. Communicate outcomes from the public forum to the community via media coverage, print materials, Internet sites, etc.

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4. Identify Potential Funders/Supporters

To effectively build support for your project, first get to know your community. Know the history and perspective of community stakeholders. Identify which individuals and organizations will be affected by your project and how. Have there been problems starting new projects in the past? Who has the power and influence to encourage or stall your project? Consider what information they will want and need to determine whether to support you. Be prepared to modify your project to better meet their needs.

Develop a list of potential funders by building on your school's previous experience and knowledge, information from peers, community leaders and the media, from your local Chamber of Commerce, Visitor's Bureau, Thompson's Registry, and Yellow Pages. Include local: clubs, organizations, and businesses. Also consider where adults in your community may volunteer, hold memberships, or travel for employment.

4.1. Past Supporters

Your best resources for funding are the individuals, groups, and organizations that have already placed their trust in you through past contributions. They already know that your school is a vital asset to the community and share similar values and goals. These supporters are aware that you are responsible for educating tomorrow's community members and work force. Send a letter to each past supporter, reminding them of your current project goals, introducing them to new projects you are trying to get off the ground, outlining your plans for the coming year, and asking them for renewed support.

4.2. Local Clubs and Organizations

Clubs and other non-profit organizations in your community consist of members who meet regularly to perform charitable services essential to the community and other worthy causes. These organizations are commonly tax exempt, 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations that sponsor fundraising events not only to raise money but also to get their members motivated and to demonstrate community spirit. They rely on a good public image to recruit new members. Involvement with your school provides community outreach opportunities and spreads goodwill.

Make a list of the clubs and organizations in your community. Research when and where they meet, the name and correct spelling of the main contact person, and any members with whom your teachers, administrators, staff or students may have a personal relationship. Clubs or organizations may include:

Assoc. of Young Americans	Knights of Columbus	Optimists
Eagles Clubs	League of Women Voters	Parent-Teacher Association
Elks Clubs	Lions Clubs	Rotary Clubs
Freemasonry	Moose Clubs	Samaritans (charity)
Jaycees	National Civic League	
Kiwanis	National Org. for Women	

4.3. Local and Regional Businesses

Look closely at local businesses in your area and you will see that you already have a relationship with many of them. A number of your students' parents, volunteers, and project committee members are employed by them. They look to you to instill employable skills and knowledge, self-confidence, and self-worth. Today's youth will one day become vital assets to their companies as well as the community. Therefore, many local businesses support communities where they operate.

Business managers and owners often determine whom and what projects to support. There are often no rules or formal policies. They are likely to provide support according to the merit of the cause and the personal relationship with those asking for help. They may be very flexible and very generous in their giving.

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Local businesses will vary considerably in the amount they can afford to give and may be more inclined to help in non-monetary (in-kind) ways. They might donate goods and services, encourage staff to volunteer, offer their professional skills, or use of their equipment or facilities for project activities and special events.

Make it a priority to ensure members of your project committee or those having a personal relationship contact these businesses personally to build relationship and set the ground work to request support for your project.

5. Research Potential Funders/Supporters

After identifying a list of potential funders, conduct in-depth research on each to better understand their philosophy and values. Learn their funding priorities, selection criteria, and requirements. Closely review what and whom they have supported in the past. Look at whether they took an active role in the supported project(s) and get to know their giving guidelines. This information may be obtained by talking with the potential funder, colleagues, parents, and administrators; reviewing articles in research journals; paying attention at events to see which funders are being acknowledged for their support; and searching online directories or databases.

Whenever possible, obtain annual reports, newsletters, lists of previous donations, press releases and application guidelines and forms, if applicable. These are generally free of charge and can be obtained upon request or may be available electronically via email or downloaded from the funder's Web site, if applicable.

5.1. Funders Support History

The two most valuable resources are the funder's annual report and donations list. These will provide insight on the organizations philosophy, beliefs, funding policy, and strategy. Looking at who they supported will help you understand the types of support, average awards, geographic region, and area of focus, i.e. literacy, math, etc.

5.2. Funders Community Involvement

The funder's community focus and involvement plays a significant role in determining who is awarded. Funders may wish to be a part of your project development, participate in community meetings, focus groups, and surveys along with other community members, or simply provide monetary or in-kind donations. Collaborate and develop relationships with local organizations to promote community involvement. Be prepared to demonstrate how the funder may participate in your project and how they will be acknowledged for their generous support.

6. Requesting Community Support

Now that you have received administrative approval and researched local organizations and businesses, your list of potential supporters will have been reduced and refined substantially. It is now time to request community support for any necessary funds, materials, or services essential to your projects success. The most common ways are to invite potential supporters for a project focused school site visit or tour and written requests for donations or in-kind support.

6.1. School Site Visit/Tour

Community charitable organizations exist mainly to be involved in and support local projects or causes that are in line with their mission and goals. School involvement allows them to reach out to the community and form relationships that will spread goodwill and foster public recognition of the organization. Inviting them to visit your school helps them personalize or humanize your school, your students, and to your pending projects. It is the perfect opportunity to discuss your plans and get some informal suggestions for ways in which they may be able to provide support now and in the future. The contact person is often eager to help you form an effective program that best meets their funding goals.

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The site visit or tour can either be at a designated time with a hard and fast agenda or held as an open house where potential funders may come and go at their leisure during a specified time frame. Consider providing food and refreshments to encourage participants to stay longer and share their ideas and concerns.

Prepare project information in advance and have it on display or ready to hand out. Include such materials as models, posters, pictures, and brochures to cover different aspects of your project. If time allows, consider tailoring the proposal submitted to garner administrative support to a one-page project snapshot so that potential funders may better determine where they might fit within your project. Have some resource materials on hand that may be taken back to the organization to share with key decision makers in the event that a representative attends your site visit rather than the person whom you invited.

Be sure knowledgeable people are on hand throughout the tour and in the display areas to answer questions and encourage suggestions and feedback. Consider utilizing a survey or questionnaire to gather participant input and have a drop-off box available for responses.

6.1.1. Create Site Visit Invitations

Handwritten invitations personalized to the mission, goals, and focus of each potential supporter with a personal signature will have greater impact. The following sample and guidance documents may be used as a reference in customizing invitations to local clubs, organizations, businesses, and key community members whom you have identified as potential supporters of your project.

[Site Visit Sample Letter](#)

[Site Visit Letter Guidance](#)

6.1.2. Track Site Visit Invitations

Keep an organized list of the invitations you have extended. Follow up on them to let them know you have sent an invitation, if they have received their invitations, whether they responded, how many will be attending your school site visit/tour, and how many actually attended. A sample is provided below:

Organization Name, Address, Phone	Contact Name	Invite Sent	Advised Sent	Confirm Receipt	RSVP Receipt	Number Expected	Number Attended
Service Club 4567 Main St. Anytown, USA 55555 Phone: 555-555-5555	Jane Donnelly	Oct 1	Oct 2	Oct 5	Oct 10	2	2

6.1.3. Site Visit Thank You Letters

Send a handwritten letter thanking those who attended your school site visit/tour for participating in your event. Assure them that you considered it to be a tremendous success, and the result was due in part to their participation. Let them know that you look forward to another open house in the future and that you hope you can count on them for continued support. Encourage the organization to take the next step: providing monetary support for your proposed project as discussed during the site visit. The following sample and guidance documents may be used as a reference in customizing your thank you letters to local clubs, organizations, businesses, and key community members who participated in your school site visit:

[Site Visit Sample Thank You Letter](#)

[Site Visit Thank You Letter Guidance](#)



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6.2. Request for Support by Letter

Local organizations want to promote a positive image and good will in the community by donating to worthy causes. They typically will not donate to your project unless you ask. The best way to ask is in person. When that is not possible, you may contact them via a well thought out donation request letter. Ensure you are appropriate in what you ask for. Asking for too much shows a lack of understanding of their business. Asking for too little means you have to ask more organizations or businesses.

6.2.1. Create Support Request Letters

The following sample and guidance documents will help you to actively and effectively solicit donations from local organizations.

[Donation Request Sample Letter](#)

[Donation Request Letter Guidance](#)

6.2.2. Track Support Request Letters

Keep an organized list of the Donation Request Letters you have mailed. Follow up on them to let them know you have sent a letter; if they have received their letter, whether they responded, if they are interested in supporting your project, or whether they will not extend support at this time. A sample is provided below:

Organization Name, Address, Phone	Contact Name	Request Sent	Advised Sent	Confirm Receipt	Response Receipt	Will Support	Will Not Support
Service Club 4567 Main St. Anytown, USA 55555 Phone: 555-555-5555	Jane Donnelly	Oct 1	Oct 2	Oct 5	Oct 10	X	N/A

6.2.3. Send Support Thank You Letters

Send a handwritten letter thanking your project contributors for their support and let them know that you look forward to joining together in your on-going effort. Be sure to also thank non-supporters for their time and consideration and leave the door open for future support opportunities. The following sample and guidance documents will help you to thank your supporters for their generosity:

[Donation Request Sample Thank You Letter](#)

[Donation Request Thank You Letter Guidance](#)

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7. Notify School/Community of Award

After you've received support from a local club, organization, business, or key community member, you will want to do everything within your power to let them know they are appreciated. Publicly acknowledge your supporters through press releases, school bulletins, bulletin boards, and marquees. Display their name and/or logo prominently (with permission) on your website. List your supporters in project brochures, newsletters, web casts, and public service announcements on community television or radio station advertisements and in local newspapers.

8. Maintain Contact with Supporters

After you've received support and announced it community wide, do not consider your job done. Whether the support is monetary, material, or another type, it is imperative that you build and maintain a lasting relationship with your supporters. Acknowledge and thank them often for their support. Send them updates on the progress of your project to assure them that their contribution is appreciated, being used wisely, and making a difference.

Most importantly, let them know that additional support is essential in order for you to continue and/or start new projects. Perhaps the best way is to invite these folks back to see your project in action. This will give them a better perspective of any additional needs you may have, which may lead to supplemental support and continued funding.

Supporters will also see first hand the quality of your program's leadership, that top program officials are focused, and that you have an active and supportive board that participates in the project and fundraising. Ultimately, if your organization appears energized and committed a local organization may be inspired to continue supporting you well into the future.

Lastly, don't worry if your program doesn't succeed initially. Local organizations are aware that not every project they support will have positive results. The idea is to work with them to identify new approaches and keep trying.