Learning Dreams Step by Step

A Guide to Support the Work of the Neighborhood Educator

Version 1.4

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1. Learning Dreams Basics

In this chapter:

- ✧ What is Learning Dreams
- ✧ Culture of Learning
- ✧ Principles of Practice
- ✧ Activities and Outcomes
- ✧ The Educational Situation
- ✧ Further Comments

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What is Learning Dreams

Learning Dreams starts from the premise that actively supporting a culture of learning in homes and communities creates a foundation for educational success. Learning Dreams offers the promise that through creative, community-based support for learning, families who are motivated by their own dreams can create the energy that propels them successfully into the world of learning. Learning Dreams initially focuses on families in their homes and communities, but its aim is to provide an innovative approach to close the educational gap for students in school.

The traditional way to generate parent involvement is to seek parent support for their child's learning. But we have found that it is more effective to appeal to the parents as deeply curious people with their own needs to dream, grow and learn. In Learning Dreams, parents of students who are struggling in school identify and pursue their own learning dreams.

By supporting the learning dreams of many parents and families in the same community, Learning Dreams is able to create a strong foundation for overall family and community learning. Over time, in addition to making progress on their own dreams, the parents also become more effective at encouraging and supporting their children's learning. Indeed, not only does it take a village to raise a child, but it takes a certain kind of village, a village dedicated to a culture of learning not only in school, but in the home and neighborhood.

Culture of Learning

A culture of learning is found in homes filled with a love of learning, where parents and children are both learning, where parents not only read to children but read to themselves, and where children see their parents model learning behaviors. In these homes, learning becomes anchored in the lives of children—not simply as a useful skill to possess but as a value without which life is incomplete. All of this happens before a child ever arrives at school, and it creates the foundation upon which school success is built.

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Other writers have also identified and understood behaviors and attitudes that set the stage for school success as being essentially cultural. Recent examples include Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhood* and James Gee's *Situated Language and Learning.*

Lareau refers to "cultural repertoires" that support learning, including: "talking with children, developing their educational interests, playing an active role in schooling,…reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation…."

Gee argues that "deep learning works better as a cultural process than it does as an instructed (school-based) process." Gee, a specialist in reading instruction concludes, "Children who learn to read successfully do so because, for them, learning to read is a cultural and not primarily an instructed process….this cultural process has long roots at home – roots which have grown strong and firm before the child has walked into a school. Children who must learn reading primarily as an instructed process in school are at an acute disadvantage."

Learning Dreams is based on the premise that to improve school outcomes for students, we must strengthen the culture of learning in the home and the community.

Principles of Practice

The following principles of practice are based on the experience of Learning Dreams pilot projects and current research in education and community development:

- Learning is fundamentally anchored in the home and community (not school)
- Parents must be involved in their own learning (not simply supporting their children)
- Parents and children can learn, even in troubled homes
- Support for learning leads to increased family and community capacity to support learning
- Building community capacity to support learning leads, over time, to improved school outcomes
- Schools must respect and support the home and community as places of learning
- A local neighborhood-based educator is crucial to involving families successfully
- Organizing a community around learning usually threatens no one and therefore receives enormous support
- People from all cultures are inherently curious and love to learn, therefore Learning Dreams is adaptable to diverse cultures
- Success in education leads to poverty reduction

Activities and Outcomes

Learning Dreams has two main streams of activity. First, it provides family learning support. A community-based Neighborhood Educator provides individual, home-based mentoring to parents in a face-to-face personal relationship. The Neighborhood Educator helps parents identify their learning dreams and locate the resources to realize their dreams. Once the parents are making progress, the Neighborhood Educator helps the parents create a plan to support the learning of their children. This work changes the traditional relationship of the parents to the institutions of learning. The traditional parent/school relationship is one-way. The parent is always asked to come to the school to help support learning at the school for the students. But through Learning Dreams, the parents seek and find new relationships with the school and other institutions in the community.

The second main activity of Learning Dreams is building community capacity to support learning. The Neighborhood Educator works with institutions in the community to help them respond in new and more creative ways to family and child learning needs. Over time these changes "rewire" community institutions, leading to an increase in community capacity and social capital to support learning. The late James Coleman defined social capital as it relates to education as "the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up."

Critical to the success of Learning Dreams is that the Neighborhood Educator aspires to be a new type of community builder. Called "New Practitioners" by L. Schorr, these master community builders are people who are able to work collaboratively, accept uncertainty, establish trust, and have a pragmatic yet creative approach to getting things done. The Learning Dreams model also requires that the Neighborhood Educator have the support of a supervisor who is preferably someone with experience in neighborhood work.

Over time Learning Dreams is expected to lead to the following measurable outcomes:

- Higher levels of parent and child participation in learning
- Increased community capacity (social capital) to support learning
- Higher levels of parent participation with schools and other community institutions
- Better school outcomes for children in participating families
- Increased effectiveness of community institutions in working with families struggling with educational success

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The Educational Situation

The need to overcome the achievement gap for educationally disadvantaged children is perhaps the single most important social policy issue facing this country. This problem is not confined to inner cities. Small rural communities are facing education gaps of similar significance. Creative efforts at many schools have attempted to narrow this achievement gap. However, there are now decades of experience and significant new research indicating that school-based efforts, on their own, will not be able to close the gap.

Learning Dreams was designed to help narrow the achievement and learning gap. It was developed by Dr. Jerome Stein, now at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work in the College of Education and Human Development. Learning Dreams was successfully implemented as a three-year pilot project beginning in 1999 in a Minneapolis, Minnesota public housing community. It led to outstanding family and community participation in learning as well as school success for children most in need. At the conclusion of the pilot project the truancy rate had fallen to zero, and the parents participated in the school at the remarkable rate of 100%. The correlations of positive outcomes at the school with this project generated significant interest in testing the applicability of the model in other communities. Learning Dreams is presently being replicated at three sites in Minnesota.

Further Comments

It is not easy to break the habit of thought that all learning must be school centered. The Neighborhood Educator and the supervisor must understand that Learning Dreams is community based. It promises to improve school outcomes over time, but it is not a traditional school-based education reform program. It is about strengthening the underlying networks and culture of learning in families and communities. It is about supporting families and students who have had to fight obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in that culture. Just as in the 16th century people had to be convinced that the earth rotated around the sun, not the sun around the earth, Learning Dreams is based on the understanding that the family and community, not the school, are at the center of learning. The school is important, but it rotates around the real heart of learning: the home and the community.

2. Making Community Connections

In this chapter:

- Getting the Lay of the Land
- Community Connections
- Identify Early Adopters
- Building Relationships with Schools
- Initial Referrals
- Invitation Letter
- Family Contact
- Contact List
- Consent Letter
- Confirm Participant Qualifications
- Further Comments
- Forms for Community Connection

Getting the Lay of the Land

Possibly the most important step taken by the Neighborhood Educator is the initial effort of getting to know the wider community within which Learning Dreams happens. The foundation for the success of the project is laid by the work of the Neighborhood Educator in these initial weeks.

Presumably the Neighborhood Educator has a working knowledge of Learning Dreams. Now it is time to understand the community where Learning Dreams is based. The Neighborhood Educator needs to start by talking to everyone and walking around the neighborhoods of the community—focusing not on school buildings, but on meeting parents and community members. The Neighborhood Educator must be as interested in neighborhood youth workers and church activists as in the principals and teachers in the schools.

Of course, the Neighborhood Educator will want to get to know the people in the relevant schools. But it is equally important that the Neighborhood Educator meet and listen to many other community members as well. In the early stages of getting to know the community, the Neighborhood Educator must be able to explain the unique nature of Learning Dreams and the possible value it might have to all community members.

By the end of the first few weeks the Neighborhood Educator should have been inside of community centers, libraries, coffee shops, and school buildings. If they have an office, they should not have been in there long enough to decorate it. We like to say that the work of Learning Dreams takes soul, but it is the kind of sole that is on the bottom of your shoe. At this phase the Neighborhood Educator should come to embody

such "sole" as they move throughout the community.

Community Connections

As the Neighborhood Educator gets the lay of the land, they can use the Community Connections Map to capture the information they learn about the community. This map serves to keep track of the many types of organizations and people in the community. It can help make sure that the Neighborhood Educator's work is balanced.

For example, if the Neighborhood Educator has only contacted government agencies and has forgotten to contact churches or other volunteer organizations, the Community Connections Map will reveal that. The map also includes space to jot down contact information for organizations and people and what resources, or gifts, they offer the community. The supervisor and the Neighborhood Educator should review this chart frequently during the early stages to stay focused on exploring the community and its possibilities.

Identify Early Adopters

The Neighborhood Educator will find that certain people love the idea of Learning Dreams. They immediately seem to understand how it is different than school-based learning and school-centered family support, and they often start suggesting families and children who would be ideal participants. These people who understand Learning Dreams quickly are crucial to the success of the program. Over time many others come to be strong supporters of Learning Dreams. It is these early adopters who initially create community support and begin to make referrals for families they think would benefit from Learning Dreams who jump start the project. It is impossible to predict where these early adopters work or live. There may be a teacher at the elementary school who loves the program. A community activist or youth worker might become a strong early supporter. A leader in the community education program might be a likely supporter.

It is very important to get the lay of the land thoroughly, as this is the only way to find the early adopters. Our experience is that it is not possible to know in advance where they will be or who they are, but there will be a significant number of such allies. Successful work depends on finding them.

Building Relationships with Schools

Teachers, principals and other members of the school community will eventually become strong allies of the Learning Dreams project. The initial approach to schools, however, should be along the following lines: The Learning Dreams project is designed to support family learning, par-

ticularly for families of children who are struggling in school. The Neighborhood Educator understands that school personnel already are doing everything that can reasonably be expected of them to support their students. It would be unfair to ask more of the schools in this regard. It may be that their budgets are being cut and they are losing the staff they need to support basic teaching. What Learning Dreams seeks from the schools therefore is a partnership where the schools continue to work at making classrooms effective learning environments for all children and Learning Dreams shoulders the effort to work with families outside the school. Other than general support and help with referrals, no extra work is required on the part of the school or the teacher. This is an approach that school staff can buy into.

Some schools, individual teachers or social workers will take it upon themselves to help with referrals. They may be early adopters. In other schools, despite formal support of the program by the school, the Neighborhood Educator may receive no referrals from school personnel. In either case the Neighborhood Educator should not count on referrals from the school but should build their own connections throughout the community.

A potential pitfall of Learning Dreams is that the school may view the Neighborhood Educator as an extension of outreach efforts they have already created. Neighborhood Educators should be willing in limited ways to support the school programs. This may include driving people to parent meetings, participating in individual conferences at school, and supporting PTAs with funds for celebrations of student learning. Nevertheless, the primary and fundamental work of the Neighborhood Educator is in the community working with the families. This is a fine line, and what makes this particularly challenging is that the requests from schools are always for worthy causes. But the Neighborhood Educator must keep focused on the family and the community. Eventually the schools become appreciative of the support and the contact between the Neighborhood Educator and the families. They will come to understand that Learning Dreams is not a school-based learning effort.

Initial Referrals

The best referrals are personal referrals from individuals who know family members well. There is no better way to build a family's trust in the Neighborhood Educator and the program than with a personal referral or contact from someone the family knows and likes. In this setting the Neighborhood Educator is seen as a potential friend, not someone representing the educational bureaucracy and someone to be suspicious of.

However, the Neighborhood Educator needs to expect some disappointment. This simple sounding "initial referrals" step is often the most prob-

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lematic. People who indicate they know many families who would be ideal for Learning Dreams may end up not contacting them. Even enthusiastic early adopters may find themselves too busy to make promised contact with new families. Persistence is crucial. The Neighborhood Educator who has not yet experienced the emotional rewards of working with families in Learning Dreams may become discouraged or even question the entire community-based learning approach. The Neighborhood Educator needs support and encouragement from their supervisor to persevere and overcome these obstacles.

Invitation Letter

The invitation letter provides a simple description of Learning Dreams and a means for the family to indicate that they and would like to be contacted. The formality of the invitation letter is important because it makes clear that the family is initiating the first contact with the program. The invitation letter can originate from the school or another institution or individual in the community. In one program a neighborhood-based social worker introduced many families to the program by distributing invitation letters. In other programs the letter has come from a school teacher or principal. In any case the invitation letter must include a method for the parents to indicate they would like to learn more about Learning Dreams. It works best if the person distributing the letter solicits the parent's signature in person rather than expecting the parent to return the signed letter through the mail.

Family Contact

Learning Dreams is a significant opportunity for parents to learn what they want to learn, to be curious about what they want to be curious about, and to dream what they want to dream. The Neighborhood Educator should emphasize this in the first contact with the parent. Learning Dreams is 100 percent voluntary on the part of the parent. After the parent understands there is no curriculum to follow and they will be supported in their learning dreams, there is normally a warm welcome for the Neighborhood Educator.

Contact List

The work of the Neighborhood Educator is out in the community. It is flexible, and it requires a significant amount of individual initiative. To support this work the Learning Dreams program uses a series of forms to keep the Neighborhood Educator accountable. The first of these forms is the Contact List.

As referrals come in, the Contact List helps organize them. The Contact List has the necessary information to initiate the first contact with the family. It also provides a framework for the supervisor and Neighbor-

hood Educator to discuss the next steps to bring families into Learning Dreams. There is usually a target goal of the number of families that should participate in the effort, and the Contact List makes it easy to track progress towards that goals. (See the discussion of performance targets in Chapter 6, Baseline Evaluation Measures.)

Consent Letter

After the family has heard about Learning Dreams they usually want to participate. Sometimes a family may need more time to decide; occasionally a family will choose not to be part of the program. Once the family agrees to participate, the Neighborhood Educator must obtain a consent letter signed by the parent. The consent letter is important because data privacy and informed participation of the families is of fundamental importance. The consent letter demonstrates that the privacy considerations and the nature of the program have been explained clearly to the family prior to their consent to participate. The consent letter should be read out loud to the family in a language they understand. The consent letter makes it possible for the schools to share confidential data that will allow evaluation of the impact of Learning Dreams on student school performance over time.

Confirm Participant Qualifications

Learning Dreams is designed to support families who are struggling to interact successfully with their children's education and schools. Indications of this struggle can vary from community to community, but generally some problem with attendance, academic achievement, or parent involvement must be present for a family to qualify for participation in Learning Dreams. The exact criteria must be determined by each locality where Learning Dreams is implemented. The signed Consent Letter allows the schools to share this information with the Neighborhood Educator to help determine whether the family qualifies. Generally all referred families qualify; the people who referred them know the families well. However, this step cannot be taken for granted.

Further Comments

The Neighborhood Educator must be focused on the community, not on the school. They must be moving around, walking and talking to people. They need to get to know personally the community workers, neighborhood activists, and many others in the community. The Learning Dreams companion manual, *Creating a Culture of Learning,*
contains additional information and exercises designed to support the Neighborhood Educator and the supervisor in learning skills needed to do this work effectively. Many people are not trained to do this and find reasons to put it off. This is particularly difficult if the supervisor has

never done this work, because they may not know how important it is and how to motivate the Neighborhood Educator to do it.

The Neighborhood Educator must be persistent about getting referrals from early supporters. The support of a supervisor or coach at this juncture is critical.

Remember to find a translator for families who need it. This person can often be much more than a translator. The right person can win acceptance in the community and very quickly become a strong advocate for the Learning Dreams project.

Learning Dreams is based on the faith that all people have dreams, are deeply curious, and under the right conditions are eager to grow and develop. Do not fall into the trap of being negative and implying that Learning Dreams is for families with problems. Convey to the families confidence and faith in their ability to be brilliant learners in whatever way they choose. Do not be concerned if the family is suspicious. They have a right to be, and this suspicion will fade over time as they see that Learning Dreams is there to support them.

Don't forget to get along with school personnel, because they are important to the success of Learning Dreams. They can refer families for participation and confirm their qualifications for participation. Schools also provide key data to evaluate the impact of Learning Dreams. Over time schools often provide space and other resources to support the project. School personnel will come to appreciate and need the Neighborhood Educator. The close relationship that develops between the Neighborhood Educator and the family and the close ties with the community make the Neighborhood Educator valuable to the school.

Forms for Community Connections

On the following pages are the forms and letters described earlier in this chapter.

Community Connections Map

Sector of Society	Name of Group/Person	Gifts	Contact Info
Private Business Media			
Public School Government			
Workplace Co-workers Others in the organization			
Voluntary Religious Non-profit/service organizations			
Informal Kinship groups Interest groups			

Contact List

Referral Date	Student Name	Parent Name	School	Phone	Permission to Contact	Initial Contact Date	Referral Source

Parent Invitation Letter
Learning Dreams

Date

Dear Parent,

We have a great opportunity for families at the School. We are offering a voluntary program for parents called the Learning Dreams Project. You are invited to participate

If you decide to take part in this project, you will have the opportunity to choose something you want to learn. You could go back to school, or get training for work, or simply learn something you want to learn for fun. You get to decide. It is up to you to choose. After you get started on your own learning project, we can also help you and your children get started on something you want to do together.

Learning Dreams is offered by the School System in partnership with the University of Minnesota. The purpose of Learning Dreams is to help families whose children go to school at the School.

YOU ONLY DO WHAT YOU WANT, NO ONE TELLS YOU WHAT TO LEARN.

Would you like to participate? Please let us know by returning this letter to the school. Community Educator of the Learning Dreams project will contact you about how you can be involved.

Thank you,

Name
Principal, the School

❒ I would like to find out more about the Learning Dreams Project offered by the School.

Date completed: _____

Parent name (please print):_____

Parent telephone: _____

Parent address: _____

Completed by (please specify: parent, teacher, other): _____

Consent Form
Learning Dreams

Parent First Name (please print) Parent Last Name (please print)

I understand that the School and Organization are conducting a project for parents called Learning Dreams. I also understand that they are inviting me to participate in this project. The purpose of Learning Dreams is to help parents of students at the School make progress toward their own learning goals.

I understand that I do not have to participate in Learning Dreams. If I decide to participate, I can stop at any time.

If I decide to participate in Learning Dreams, I understand that I will be asked basic information about my interests, learning, and family. I will be contacted at least once every two weeks by Learning Dreams to assist me in identifying my specific learning goals and in making progress toward them. I give my permission for Learning Dreams to have access to my children's school records for the purpose of evaluating this project. My name and my children's names will not be associated with any of the data that is collected, unless I give permission in advance. I also understand that there are no personal risks associated with my participation in this project and no benefits other than progress on my own learning.

If I have questions, I can call **Neighborhood Educator Name** at **phone number** or **Supervisor Name** at **phone number** from the Learning Dreams project. I will be given a copy of this sheet for my records.

☐ I have read this consent form. I understand its contents. My questions have been answered. My signature means that I agree to participate in Learning Dreams.

☐ This form was read to me. I understand its contents. My questions have been answered. My signature means that I agree to participate in Learning Dreams.

☐ I choose to not participate in Learning Dreams.

Parent Signature Date