LESSON 2
Building a Garden Leadership Team

In this lesson, you will learn about how to build an effective and lasting garden leadership team using the Asset-Based Community Development approach. A garden program dependent on a sole parent or teacher is extremely difficult to sustain once the champion moves on and, unfortunately, the program usually does not survive. Building a strong team of people can prevent the garden from falling to the wayside when that one important person leaves the school. It is essential to have a number of diverse stakeholder groups involved in contributing to the garden program's success from the beginning. A "stakeholder group" is simply a group of people who have a shared interest in the garden. As an example, teachers at the school would be a stakeholder group.

A second, equally-important reason for a strong garden leadership team is that it can more effectively represent and address all the diverse opinions, concerns, and needs of those affected by the garden. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, food service workers, maintenance staff, and community members will all have thoughts on the garden program and how to maintain it, so it's necessary to have representatives of each of these groups on the leadership team. That way, each stakeholder group has someone who they can go to with concerns or suggestions who can, in turn, represent their views in garden leadership meetings. If each stakeholder group feels that their views are acknowledged and addressed, they are more likely to support the effort.

In both this course and in Gardening 201: How to Start and Manage Community Gardens we emphasize Asset-Based Community Development as an effective organizing strategy. Much of the material in this lesson also exists in Gardening 201, but we emphasize differences and important considerations for school garden program planning in this course .

Learning Objectives

1. Understand Asset-Based Community Development as a method of building a leadership team.
2. Know the steps to take to recruit and retain leadership team members.

Asset-Based Community Development

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a framework for organizing of any kind – not just for gardens – emphasizing the strengths and assets of a community and its members and making the most of these assets for the particular development project. ABCD promotes a "glass-half-full" mindset for the school garden creation process. The guiding question of the ABCD approach is "What existing resources and skills are available to us at our school and in our local community?" This approach puts a positive spin on the "needs-based" approach to community development, in which a group would seek to identify solutions to a particular problem in their community.

As described by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, ABCD "is intentional about keeping our focus on assets and celebrating what is right with our community. You will notice that as people begin to talk about the positive things in the community, when they are encouraged to talk about what is working, when they learn of all the great resources that are in their neighborhood (and in some cases have always been available in their neighborhood), the energy level will increase exponentially" (INRC Organizers Workbook). We see a successful school gardening program as being a part of the surrounding community, not separate from it, so school garden planning can benefit from this positive, community-based planning perspective.

Below are three concise characteristics of ABCD and three types of assets that you might find in your school and community (both adapted from the Toronto Community Garden Network's "Community Garden Handbook"), to help you visualize the ABCD approach.

Three Primary Characteristics of ABCD

1. Asset based – Garden planning is based around individual contributions, associations, local institutions and the local ecology and economy of a school and neighborhood.

2. Internally focused – Development strategies focus on the interests and problem-solving capabilities of school members, local residents, local associations and local institutions.

3. Relationship driven – This approach promotes the development of relationships between students, parents, teachers, administrators, local associations and other local institutions by constantly asking whether actions will positively contribute to stronger relationships.

Five Categories of Assets

The following are the types of assets you might find in your school and community. When you are brainstorming possible assets, make sure to think about all of these categories.

1. Personal skills and tools – The specific talents, skills, and resources that you individually possess that can be put to work to build the garden program. (Examples: gardening experience, people-organizing skills, computer skills, construction skills, legal knowledge, musical talents, monetary donations, materials donations, etc.)

2. People you know and their skills and tools – The people you know well or relatively well who might have skills or tools like those listed under personal skills, and also those peoples' connections to others.

3. Groups/businesses in which you have direct connections– The local groups and businesses that have a member that you know personally, and the specific help they can offer. Help can come in the form of monetary donations, material donations, promotion, volunteers, space for meeting, etc. (Examples: local government, community organizations, churches, printing shops that can do free copies of posters, local newspapers that publish stories on community projects, garden centers that donate plants, etc.)

ACTIVITY 1: MAPPING COMMUNITY ASSETS

In this activity you will practice identifying the potential partners and assets available to you when planning your school garden. All schools are different; therefore, it is recommended that you conduct this activity with your own school garden planning group early in the planning stages. The goal is to brainstorm all the assets available from the different groups, people, and organizations involved in the garden project, using the three categories of assets as a guide, and the benefits those entities can gain from involvement in the garden. You should do this early on to help guide your recruitment (see below), and then once again after you have established a larger core garden leadership team, to expand your reach and strengthen the program.

The following steps and example map are adapted from the Toronto Community Garden Network's "Community Garden Handbook."

1. On a large sheet, draw a circle in the middle and write "School Garden Project," or the appropriate name for your own project, inside.

2. On the outside edges of the paper write the names of partners or potential partners you can identify and draw a circle around each of them. Think creatively about potential partners.

3. Brainstorm ways that each partner can help the school gardening project, again thinking creatively. For example, a local senior center might be a great resource for garden volunteers, which would allow for intergenerational learning at the garden.

4. Draw an arrow from each partner to the garden circle and label each arrow with the ways that partner can contribute to the garden effort.

5. Brainstorm what the garden can offer each partner, referring back to the benefits in Lesson 1 for inspiration. For example, the school garden might provide participating seniors with a source of low-impact exercise and mental stimulation.

6. Draw an arrow from the garden to each potential partner, and label those arrows with the ways the garden can benefit the partners. The result is labeled arrows in both directions between each partner and the garden project.

Growing a Team of School Garden Leaders

The following is a list of steps to take to build a garden team, which you can follow in approximately chronological order.

1. Identify 2-3 initial organizers.
   Most likely a school garden project will start with just a couple of organizers, and that's fine. The goal should be to make that group of organizers larger early on, to distribute tasks and responsibility and to create the stakeholder support necessary for a successful sustainable garden. The first 2-3 might be a couple of parents and/or teachers who see the educational benefits of a school gardening program.

2. Brainstorm all possible stakeholder groups.
   Together with your 1-2 additional early organizers, make an assets map for your project. Be creative and include as many possible stakeholder groups as you think might be involved. Groups might be: students, parents, teachers, administrators, food service staff, maintenance staff, after-school program organizers and instructors, school neighbors, local community groups (e.g. faith communities, homeowners associations, nonprofits), city or county garden organizations, local government officials, local law enforcement officials, etc. This can be a broad list to start. Put these people on the assets map and label the map with your ideas for how the garden program can benefit those people and vice versa.

3. Brainstorm people to approach in each stakeholder group.
   Go through the stakeholder groups and brainstorm a list of contacts for each group. The focus should be on people team members know personally, but don't limit the list too much early on. You can include people who are once-removed (i.e. friend of a friend). Divide your list up between the initial organizers, and prioritize based on how well you know the person and their expected interest and possible contributions.

4. Personally contact people on the list to assess their interest.

Make personal contact with each person, ideally through a face-to-face meeting or phone call. With personal contact you can make the person feel that they are important to the process and give them a chance to express thoughts and questions. The goal should be to introduce the idea of the school gardening program and the expected benefits to the various groups, and to assess whether that particular person would be interested in joining the core organizing group for the garden. You can ask questions such as:
What benefits do you see for yourself/your family/the school/the community from a school gardening program?

- What kind of garden do you envision?
- What skills might you be able to bring to the effort?
- Would you be interested in joining the garden leadership team? If not, how would you like to be involved?
- What is your availability for meetings?
- Do you have any concerns about the program?
- Who else would you suggest we get in touch with?

Before your meetings, anticipate potential concerns that people might bring up, and come up with some responses to these challenges ahead of time. Overall, you are aiming to recruit more people withinterest and skills, time, or funds to offer as a memberof the leadership team. You are also aiming to assess interest across the stakeholder groups. These people you contact will often approximately represent the views of others in their stakeholder groups.

5. Schedule an open meeting for all interested parties for initial planning of the school gardening program.

Plan a meeting, ideally at the school, and invite all of your contacts that expressed interest in the project. Encourage them to invite their friends/colleagues/etc. who might be interested. Advertise the meeting around the neighborhood. The goal should be to get a large number of potential collaborators to attend. At the meeting, introduce the project idea, and allow plenty of time and opportunity for people to express their thoughts and concerns.

6. Use the stakeholder groups' input to guide the goals for the garden.

After you've taken the steps above and have a sense of who is most interested in getting the garden project off the ground, you can use this information to guide the type of garden program you build. For example, if you have more support from after-school program organizers than teachers, plan a garden program that more heavily focuses on after school time rather than time during the school day. This does not diminish the importance of having teacher support. It allows you to build a successful gardening program even if few teachers are currently interested in the garden as an outdoor classroom. The effort of the garden team would then be focused on after-school planning. The support of teachers can be built over time. This approach responds to current interests and creates more excitement about the program. It is an example of Asset-Based Community Development- focusing your efforts on existing interest, and then building from there.

7. Schedule regular meetings for the garden leadership team.

Find a time that tends to work for the group and schedule meetings during that time. Schedule these meetings well ahead of time so people can plan around them. Assign a leader, note taker, and timekeeper (doesn't have to be three different people). For efficiency and reliability, always have a clear meeting agenda and follow it closely during the meeting. This will help leaders feel that their time is being used well. This efficiency will make them and possibly new leaders more likely to participate. An agenda should include the following, and amounts of time allotted:

- introductions of attendees
- overview of the agenda and goals for the meeting
- initial thoughts on the gardening program from the initial planners and any plans that have already been made

- time for each attendee to state their goals for the gardening program
- open discussion time
- define roles for participants
- next steps (spell out clear actions and goals for each interested participant that will be accomplished by a stated date; making expected actions clear and known to the whole group will increase action after the meeting)
- schedule the next meeting

A note on school principals: It's very important to speak with the school principal about the garden project early in the planning process. The principal can have a lot of influence over whether the project is encouraged or impeded so assess their receptivity to the project early. It's good to know the principal's style concerning new activities, if possible (is he/she conservative with new ideas or generally open to new ideas?). This knowledge will help you shape your approach for gaining his/her support for the project. Come prepared with lots of examples that demonstrate the benefits of the project, as well as thoughts on how you'll manage risks and sustain the garden. Encourage the principal to withhold judgment until there's a more solid plan in place, but if it's possible the principal will never be a supporter, it's good to know this early so you can avoid wasting your time.

8. Find multiple levels of involvement for leaders.
   Some garden leadership team members will have more time to spend on the project than others, but all contributions are valuable, so it's useful to have multiple levels of involvement. You could schedule meetings that certain members are only requested to attend every other month or quarterly, to provide the most active members additional perspectives in making decisions. You could also schedule meetings on a particular agenda topic so that not everyone has to attend every meeting. These kinds of techniques help reduce or eliminate burnout.

ACTIVITY 2: STEP INTO STAKEHOLDER SHOES

Each class participant is assigned to imagine themselves as a member of a single stakeholder group (i.e., teacher, parent, student, etc). Each stakeholder group gets a chance to express their goals, needs, and concerns for the garden. Write these thoughts on an erasable board. The purpose is to help participants considera variety of potential perspectives. You can use benefits from Lesson 1 as inspiration for your brainstorming.

Reference

1. INRC Organizers Workbook.
   Asset Based Community Development Institute.
   Available at: www.inrc.org/resources/publications