

A Place for Growing Up:

Report of the Hastings-on-Hudson Joint Committee On Youth and Their Families

Marjorie Apel, Chair (Board of Trustees)
Michael Holstein (Board of Education)
Bruce Jennings (Board of Trustees)
Anne Woods (Board of Education)

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I. Introduction

At a joint meeting of the Village Board of Trustees and the Board of Education, held on March 3, 2003, an *ad hoc* committee was formed to explore ways in which the Village and the School District might further support and supplement existing efforts to prevent at-risk behavior among Hastings youth, to enhance the developmental opportunities and quality of life for young people in the village and to support families in providing children with healthy growth and direction.

At its first meeting, the Joint Committee drafted the following mission statement and a set of objectives, which were subsequently reviewed, modified and approved by the Village Board and the School Board:

The Joint Committee was created to conduct a study of factors that affect the quality of life of youth and their families in the Village and the School District and to make recommendations concerning future activities that may be undertaken for the benefit of youth and their families.

The objectives of the Joint Committee are to:

- (1) Review existing services and programs, including village-sponsored, school-sponsored and private resources in Hastings and the surrounding area (i.e., the Town of Greenburgh and the other Rivertown villages).*
- (2) Educate community leaders and the general community about the needs of young people and their families (e.g., through discussion contained in its written report, through working with other village groups on educational programs, or through organizing one or more community forums).*
- (3) Produce recommendations for possible Village Board, School Board and community action.*

II. The Work of the Joint Committee

The work of the Joint Committee was premised upon a recognition that there are a number of structures already in place dedicated to the support of Hastings youth. Most notably, these include the Youth Council, the office of the Youth Advocate, the Superintendent's Community Leaders group, the Police Department's Youth Officer and, more recently, the program through which police officers out of uniform regularly spend time at the high school and middle school to be available to talk informally with students. The Joint Committee undertook to ascertain whether these and other initiatives provide youth and their families with sufficient comprehensive support services, or whether gaps exist that might be filled under the direction, and with the support, of the Village Board and the School Board.

The Joint Committee met approximately six times over the past year. Work of the Joint Committee included reviewing and discussing the vast array of both public and private programs and services currently available to Hastings youth, meetings with the Youth Advocate and the Youth Council, and compiling basic contact information from a wide range of youth-related organizations in the area.

III. Findings

(1) An informal review of existing services and programs indicates that within the Village, School District, the other Rivertowns and the County, a wide variety of effective programs and services exist. These include:

- ✦ Activities for youth sponsored by the village Recreation Department;
- ✦ After-school activities (athletics, clubs, performing arts) sponsored by the school district;
- ✦ Extensive private offerings, such as music, dance, theatre, sports and martial arts, fine arts (e.g., pottery), including both individual and group instruction;
- ✦ Youth-oriented programs sponsored by local houses of worship;
- ✦ Psychologists, social workers and counselors on site in the schools;
- ✦ Individual outreach conducted by the Youth Advocate;
- ✦ Police Liaison Officer at the school; and
- ✦ Numerous psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, educational therapists and tutors, among other professionals, who live and practice in Hastings or in neighboring villages and whose practice is focused on youth.

(2) Community leaders are well-informed about the needs of our youth and their families, and are actively engaged in efforts to meet these needs. In their individual capacities as members of the clergy and leaders of local government, police, school, and PTSA, providing programs and support services for youth and their families is an integral aspect of their work. Through such vehicles as the Youth Council and the Community Leaders group, they exchange information about issues facing youth, share strategies for addressing these issues and work collaboratively to identify potential solutions for problems as they arise.

(3) The general community appears to be less consistently well-informed about many of the issues facing our youth. Grade level meetings for parents held in the past have been generally well received, and have provided a useful forum for better informing parents about common issues that arise with youth at particular grades and ages, and supporting parents in addressing those issues with their own children. In addition, the school and the PTSA periodically sponsor outside speakers who address similar issues.

Nonetheless, we find that the community would benefit from more regularly-scheduled opportunities to provide parents with important information and enable parents to better exchange ideas and strategies.

(4) Access to information about available services and programs has improved recently, due in part to the village and school district web sites, broadcast email services and local access television. The village in its semi-annual Newsletter has just published a directory of programs and services, but this is not comprehensive in that it does not include, for example, either school-sponsored or privately offered services and programs.

We find that more coordination and consolidation of this type of information is needed and would be beneficial.

(5) A variety of educational opportunities for students in connection with ongoing work in the village are missed due to an apparent lack of awareness of current local projects. Examples include studies and presentations on waterfront clean-up, village planning (e.g., walkable communities), the study of local art, architecture and design (from either a historical or a planning perspective), historical archives and other resources, etc.

(6) There continues to be a need for ongoing community-wide discussion of the issues facing youth today, and the roles of community members, educators and parents in supporting youth as they face these challenges.

(7) All members of the Joint Committee found that the opportunity for more frequent, informal exchange of information regarding the work of the Village Board and the School Board to be very helpful.

IV. Recommendations

(1) A comprehensive directory of programs and services offered by the Village and the School District should be produced, disseminated, and periodically updated. This would be of tremendous value to the community. The Joint Committee recommends that the directory be available both as a hard copy booklet and as a downloadable document posted on both the Village and the School District websites. It will need to be determined what resources are required both to create and to maintain a directory of this type.

Assuming that the necessary resources are available, the Joint Committee recommends that the project be sponsored and funded by the Village and School District jointly.¹

(2) Increase community/parent awareness of youth challenges and proven strategies to meet those challenges would benefit the entire community. Increased awareness could be achieved in part by means of more community forums on topics related to youth. The goals of each forum would be (a) to bring to the community a speaker who is an expert on issues affecting youth, and (b) to provide an opportunity for more informed discussion of these issues. The Joint Committee recommends that the Village and School Board explore the possibility of jointly sponsoring at least 1 forum or similar program each year.

(3) The Joint Committee encourages the Youth Council, possibly in conjunction with the Community Leaders group, to conduct a day-long retreat at which community leaders might have more time and opportunity to address some critical underlying questions related to at-risk behavior among local youth.

(4) The Joint Committee recommends that the Youth Council play a leadership role in facilitating an ongoing community dialogue that addresses the more fundamental questions regarding growing up in our community. A number of possible discussion topics emerged from the interviews and meetings conducted by the Joint Committee, and are included in section V. of this report in the hope that they may serve as a catalyst for future community discussion.

(5) The Police Liaison Officer and the time officers spend in the school for informal counseling and conversation appear to be well received by students. The Joint Committee recommends that this position and program continue.

(6) The Joint Committee recommends that the Village and School District identify more effective means of ensuring that information regarding Village projects be communicated to the appropriate school personnel, so that students may benefit from participation in or awareness of projects that relate to curriculum content, and faculty may have the opportunity to access consultants and speakers hired by the Village in connection with these projects.

(7) The Joint Committee recommends that the Board of Trustees and the Board of Education create an ad hoc Joint Boards Liaison Committee to discuss matters of common interest as they arise between our semi-annual joint board meetings.

¹ It is the view of the Joint Committee that the mere inclusion of a program description in this directory at least indirectly implies an endorsement of the program to parents. With this in mind we recommend that only publicly sponsored programs be included. We believe that it is not feasible to screen or evaluate private programs and services; therefore, they cannot responsibly be included in the directory.

(8) The Joint Committee recommends that each year at the Spring Thing a table be added at which information regarding programs and services for youth and their families could be disseminated.

(9) The Joint Committee supports the efforts of the School District's strategic planning initiative, in which one area of focus is strengthening the connection between the schools and the community.

V. Toward an Ongoing Dialogue

A number of basic questions emerged from the topics discussed and the interviews and meetings conducted by the Joint Committee. We offer them here, not as settled issues, but as problems in need of further reflection and conversation by the village as a whole. They are not new; nor are they intended to be exhaustive. The village and the schools have been grappling with them for some time. But these questions require our continuing attention. They point in the direction of the more specific findings and recommendations presented above.

In essence, these fundamental questions have to do with the kind of community in which we wish to live and rear our children; they have to do with our roles and responsibilities as parents and as adult role models, and they have to do with the supports and the environment within which young people can make a successful transition from adolescence to young adulthood. No community can afford to ignore such questions.

What kind of community do we want? Consider the following proposition:

The principal challenge facing Hastings today is to allow spaces to open up in our community where our teens can be safe but still have the freedom to experiment, to develop skills of social interaction, conflict resolution, and creative problem-solving, and to make and find their own meaning in music, art, hobbies, relationships, sports, intellectual pursuits, religious life, or community involvement.

For all our programming and all our breathless activity, how is Hastings doing on this score? Is such an environment being provided now in the culture of adolescence in Hastings? Are any important interests or developmental needs falling between the cracks? Are any groups of children or any developmentally important interests being overlooked?

Is this a vision we could all get behind and endorse? If not, what alternative vision would be more desirable?

What do we want for our children? What as a village, as a school system, and as parents are our goals and duties toward the development of our teens? What kind of people, with what capacities, skills, and traits, should we try to shape and nurture in Hastings? Can we prioritize, even roughly, such goals?

- safety and security
- intellectual achievement and growth
- emotional growth and maturity
- moral values and virtues
- personal characteristics (e.g. curiosity, tolerance, open mindedness, obedience, deference to authority, respect, personal manners of behavior and deportment, and the like)

How can we be better parents? What kind of parenting does the village want to encourage? There may be a dilemma here. On the one hand, we are an open society and must tolerate a wide diversity of parental styles and beliefs about appropriate family relationships. On the other hand, we do not wish to look the other way and ignore manifestly dysfunctional and detrimental parenting behavior. In cases of abuse, our response is defined by law. But in the gray areas of poor parenting, what interventions are helpful and appropriate, if any?

Let's continue to talk together about how to build a culture and a community in which families can help their children to grow up meaningfully. Successful growing up and successful parenting do not happen by magic or by accident. They require a supportive atmosphere, a social ecology of a certain kind, the right kind of "social capital" (network of institutions and activities), and a culture that is conducive and supportive of the developmental needs of individuals as they make a transition from childhood to adulthood, from socially controlled wards to autonomous, self-directing and self-disciplining persons.