

Making the Change

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The Itasca Project is a CEO-led civic endeavor that brought to light the stark race, class, and place disparities standing in the way of Twin Cities' successful future. This section presents stories about local efforts to bridge the gap. As Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution emphasizes, eliminating disparities is "not only the right thing to do, but a competitive thing to do" and "it's now time not only to mind the gap, but more importantly to close the gap."

Despite serious disparities similar to other metro regions in the nation, there is hope for improvement in the Twin Cities. The Itasca Project is a group of committed business leaders who have examined the problems, and are actively seeking solutions from within the state and the nation. There is a growing consensus that these issues cannot be resolved solely by the individual efforts of government, businesses or non-profit organizations. All sectors of our society need to come together to deliver on the promise of a successful future for all.

This section highlights stories of hope and success. From individual drive to community efforts, from business leaders to policy makers, from faith-based initiatives to government-led projects, these stories demonstrate how we can take action on eliminating disparities. They also seek to inspire action beyond the classroom to continue engaging our communities, and encouraging dialogue and efforts to improve the quality of life for everyone in the Twin Cities.

Key Terms

Community reclamation
E-mentoring
Entrepreneur
Ex-offender, Re-entry
De Facto Segregation
Immersive Education
Parent Involvement
Restorative justice
Revitalization
Volunteerism

STORY: Hiring from the Heart

This is a story about Karen, a Native American woman supported by the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center and hired by a local business. Karen's dedication and drive to improve her life enabled her to move out of subsidized housing and make a living by doing what she loves to do. Her story demonstrates a successful model for partnership between human services, government, and business.

Discussion Questions

1. What helped Karen to "overcome her past"?
2. How important is personal dedication and drive in overcoming one's difficulties?
3. When Tom Siwek talks about "choosing based not only on what our math says but on what our heart says," what does he mean?
4. What are other situations in which you may want to make a similar choice?
5. What is the significance of the dual reality of "contributing and reliance" in Karen's story?
6. What did Suzanne Koeppinger have to say about the role of the government in resolving societal issues, such as Karen's?
7. What do you think the government's role should be?
8. Who else should be involved?
9. What can you do?

Ideas for Action

Personal Reflection

Have students individually reflect on their personal goals and barriers to achievement by answering the following questions:

- What holds you back?
- What helps you to move forward?
- What are the barriers?
- How can you overcome them?

Strategizing for Action

Have students research local government services, business opportunities, and non-profit organizations that could partner to resolve issues such as Karen's. It is important to know the stakeholders to be able to effect change.

Human Rights Framework

Have students work in small groups to examine the story through the human rights lens. What human rights issues are present in Karen's issue? What rights are involved? What local, and international human rights documents protect these rights? Who else do you think faces these same human rights violations?

Examining Hiring Practices

Have students interview a local business or their school board or administration officials about their hiring practices. How are these decisions made? What impact do they have on the larger community? Why is it important to hire a diverse workforce?

STORY: E-mentoring

This is a story about an e-mentoring project connecting busy professionals with students in need of guidance. There are over six million people in the United States who volunteer through or with an organization, but it is hard for many people to find the time between work and family. The United Way Caring Connections project's online database allows professionals like Theresa Reinea to mentor students without leaving her workplace. Theresa used e-mail to launch an e-mentoring project. She is convinced that mentoring works and is inspired to make changes in young people's lives.

Discussion Questions

1. What is unique about the e-mentoring project?
2. How does it help connect people who want to be mentors with those who are in need of guidance?
3. Why did Theresa want to change her business' outreach model?
4. Why does Theresa believe both mentors and mentees benefit from the process?
5. What did Theresa have to say about mentoring?
6. Would you like to participate in an e-mentoring process as a mentor or as a mentee?
7. What do you think you could contribute and gain from the process?
8. Do you have additional ideas that would make the e-mentoring project even more valuable?

Ideas for Action

Individual SWOT Analysis

Have students do an individual SWOT analysis. What are their strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats in terms of knowledge, skills, and character? What helps them succeed and what would they like to change? What can they share with others and what would they like to learn from others?

Peer Mentoring

Invite students to come up with their own mentoring project. Students can create a database at school and match up with students based on their interests and skills. Students also can create an e-mentoring project with current college students to learn firsthand about life in college. To learn more about mentoring in Minnesota, please visit the Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota at <http://www.mentoringworks.org>

STORY: Community Garden Re-Union

This story highlights the Community Garden project in South Minneapolis and people who made a difference in the lives of others in their community. Twin Cities Public Television first covered this Community Garden in the mid 1990s. Now, more than a decade later, we reunite with people in their old neighborhood and listen to their stories. These are stories of people touching each others' lives through work and fun in the garden, and how those experiences spread to other parts of their lives.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Minneapolis was "Murderopolis" to the nation?
2. What were communities struggling with back then and now?
3. How did the Community Garden help to bring people together?
4. How did their activities in the garden spread to other parts of their lives?
5. Why do you think people feel a deeper connection to their community through their work at the Community Garden?
6. How are you involved in your community?
7. How would you like to be involved?

Ideas for Action

Community Involvement

Invite students to participate in their community, or organize their own community project. What is going on in your community? Who makes the decisions? How can you be involved? For more information on Community Gardens in the Twin Cities, visit the Twin Cities Green Guide at <http://www.thegreenguide.org/article/community/gardens>

As a follow-up to this activity, invite student to look at their school community, and issues facing the school. They can also explore ways to connect to global community-building efforts. For example, they can explore the Public Achievement Program at the Center for Democracy and Leadership at: www.publicachievement.org

STORY: Immersive Education

This story focuses on the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA), and MUST (Metro-Urban Studies Term), one of their successful initiatives. MUST provides a unique hands-on field experience, where students spend a “Day in the Life” of underprivileged people and learn how to overcome challenges facing these people. As a result, the students are better equipped to take action on their own behalf and on behalf of others, and bring about change in their communities.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of experiences does HECUA seek to provide to make students “complete citizens”?
2. What is unique about MUST?
3. What challenges and issues do students learn about through the “A Day in the Life” project?
4. What were students’ reactions to the challenges they had encountered?
5. Why is it important for students from privileged backgrounds to see firsthand how underprivileged people live?
6. Did you or would you like to have similar experiences as a part of your learning?
7. With what projects would you like to be involved?
8. After students complete their coursework with HECUA, what do you think they should do next?

Ideas for Action

“Day in the Life” project

Invite students to partner with local non-profit organizations and government services to create their own “Day in the Life” project. Students can then submit short stories written from the perspective of the person whose life they have observed.

Intern & Volunteer

Invite students to explore internship and volunteer opportunities in the Twin Cities. The HECUA website provides a list of internship opportunities available through a number of local organizations: <http://www.hecua.org/inter-must.php>

The Volunteer Match website provides a list of volunteer opportunities in the Twin Cities: www.volunteermatch.org

Hunger Solutions Minnesota provides a list of opportunities to volunteer to help end hunger in Minnesota: <http://www.hungersolutions.org/do>

United Way provides a number of ways to volunteer, and help build stronger communities: <http://volunteer.unitedway.org>

STORY: Power of Parents in Education

This story describes Hale and Field, a high performing Minneapolis public school, which emphasizes parent participation. The school has a network of parent volunteers who are not only involved in helping their own children, but are part of the overall school support system. Parents' presence in school sends a positive message to students that education is the priority.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the hallmark of Hale and Field?
2. Why does it emphasize parent participation?
3. What do parents do to keep Hale and Field's status as a high performing school?
4. Why is parents' participation important?
5. What aspects or challenges of school life can parents' participation facilitate or improve?
6. Would parent involvement help with discipline and bullying issues?
7. Would you like your parents or relatives to be more involved in your school life? Why or why not?
8. Should Hale and Field look for people other than parents to build school community?

Ideas for Action

Getting the Facts

Invite students to do research on parent involvement in their school. The research may involve meeting with PTA groups and other school organizations. It may also involve creating a school-wide survey on parent involvement.

Parent Recruitment

Invite students to organize a parent recruitment event. They can present the results of their research, and organize a school-wide or class-wide event for parents to encourage their participation in school activities.

STORY: Origins of the African American Men Project

This story uncovers the African American Men Project and its unlikely origins. The project aims at enhancing the lives of African American men. It started with an awkward question asked by a Hennepin County Commissioner Mark Stenglein: Why are there so many African American men who are not participating in our oft-praised robust economy? Since then, communication and dialogue has helped to establish a nationally recognized initiative. Over 500 people are working, continuing their education, or have graduated as a result of their involvement with this project.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the African American Men project begin?
2. Why was it an “awkward” question?
3. Why do you think many African American men are not engaged in the Twin Cities robust economy?
4. What were some of the barriers for African American men?
5. How did the restorative justice project help both the county and the men?
6. How does the African American Men project help ex-offenders to reintegrate into community?
7. What are some of the project successes so far?
8. What is the connection between giving ex-offenders a second chance and the overall well-being of the community?
9. How does it affect the overall region’s well-being and you personally?

Ideas for Action

Getting the Facts

Have the students review and discuss a fact sheet developed by the Hennepin County on the African American Men project and its impact at:

<http://www.co.hennepin.mn.us/images/HCIInternet/Static%20Files/120197149AfricanAmericanMenProject.pdf>

“Awkward Questions”

Have students look at their school or communities and come up with some “awkward questions” about local issues. Organize a school or community-wide meeting and invite students to present their questions.

STORY: The Church as a Gateway

This story uncovers the Stairstep Initiative, which works to promote the historic role of the Church in the African American community. The project seeks to engage the church in a variety of community issues, and build the church's credibility and capacity while also strengthening the community. This faith-based effort does not mean evangelization. Instead, it calls for a network for churches to come up with a unique approach to each community.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the goal of the Stairstep Initiative?
2. How can the church rebuild its credibility and capacity?
3. How can the churches combine their faith-driven efforts with provision of services to the community members?
4. Why is it important for churches to develop a "unique and customized approach" to each community?
5. What can churches do as a network to improve the quality of life in their communities?
6. Besides churches, what other organizations can work to address community problems?
7. One leader of the Stairstep Initiative spoke about being sensitive to the issues and occurrences in one another's lives. What does this mean? What does this look like?
8. If you are involved in a church or another religion organization, what are some examples of faith-based efforts in your community?

Ideas for Action

Getting the Facts

Invite the students to do research and learn about recent trends and legal developments concerning the involvement of faith-based organizations in social services.

A few useful websites:

- Stairstep Initiative
www.stairstep.org
- *The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy*
www.religionandsocialpolicy.org
- Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota
www.lssmn.org
- Engage Minnesota
www.engagemn.com

Review & Recommend

Have the students review faith-based efforts in their communities. In what community projects are churches and other faith-based organizations involved? What are the impacts? Invite students to look at what faith-based organizations are already doing and come up with recommendations of what else is needed in their communities.

STORY: Impact of Minority Entrepreneurs

This is a story about Joe Minjares, and the impact of his successful business on his community in South Minneapolis. Joe is the owner of Pepitos restaurant, and the historic Parkway Cinema, a recent addition to his business. In the first half of the 20th century, the cinema had a separate seating area for people of color, but even today Joe sometimes has to deal with intolerance and racism. Despite these issues, Joe continues to be engaged in his community and in preserving its history.

Discussion Questions

1. How has Joe Menjares' restaurant, Pepito's, helped to revitalize the neighborhood business district in which he lives?
2. What does Joe have to say about the derogatory term "lazy Mexican"? Have you heard similar expressions about other minorities? Why do you think people choose to label other people like that?
3. Why does Joe want to preserve a part of history in his neighbourhood?
4. What have we learned about de-facto segregation in the first half of the 20th century? How is it different today?
5. What is Joe's response to racism and intolerance?
6. Why is it important to support minority businesses? How can you do that?

Ideas for Action

Getting the Facts

Have the students review and discuss information about minority business ownership in the Twin Cities.

Useful sites:

- Metropolitan Economic Development Association: www.meda.net
- Minority Business Entrepreneur: www.mbemag.com

Support a minority business!

Invite students to support a local business owned by minority entrepreneur. Organize a field trip for students to meet some local minority entrepreneurs, e.g. joint restaurant outing or a trip to a jewelry or bookstore. Invite students to consider volunteering with a minority business.

