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# The Participatory Action Research Model

University of Pennsylvania Center for Community Partnerships

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**University of Pennsylvania  
Center for Community Partnerships**

**The Participatory Action Research Model**

From the Office of the President to the dormitories of first-year students, there is a strong commitment to community service at the University of Pennsylvania. The Center for Community Partnerships serves as Penn's bridge to the community by channeling the idealism, skills, and abilities of Penn faculty, staff, and students and the resources of the University to help improve the quality of life in our city and neighborhoods. Since 1992, the Center for Community Partnerships has been the cornerstone of community service efforts at Penn. Building upon the University's strong foundation of community-based programs and drawing upon Benjamin Franklin's legacy that service is "the great Aim and End of all Learning", the Center has become a model of "practical idealism" for higher education.

What distinguishes Penn's Center for Community Partnerships from similar initiatives is our emphasis on the concept of partnership. Born from the idea that colleges and universities have a major role to play in rebuilding and revitalizing our nation's cities, the Center enables Penn to be a neighbor working *with* the community and City of Philadelphia. In addition, the Center is dedicated to creating a network of institutions committed to developing mutually-beneficial community collaborations. The Center has become a nationally recognized leader in the field of academically-based community service and the application of University resources for the improvement of local schools and communities.

The Center for Community Partnerships maintains the following goals:

To improve the internal coordination and collaboration of all University-wide community service programs.

To build effective partnerships between the University and the community.

To participate in collaborative community improvement initiatives with other institutions as well as with community groups.

The Center for Community Partnerships sponsors research projects, hosts faculty and student seminars, and has been instrumental in securing grants to support community service programs and projects. The Center works with faculty members and students from Penn's 12 schools and colleges in coordinating University community service programs and the efforts of thousands of volunteers. In addition, the Center's efforts involve several departments and offices within the University including Human Resources, the Medical Center, the Penn Program for Public Service, Purchasing, Penn Volunteers in Public Service (the staff, faculty, and alumni volunteer

organization), and Penn's Program for Student-Community Relations, which serves as an active liaison between Penn and neighborhood organizations and business and community leaders. The activities of the Center are guided by three distinguished internal and external advisory boards comprised of Penn staff, faculty, students, and West Philadelphia and city leaders. In addition, a Center working group, composed of Penn staff representatives responsible for community service and out reach activities, plays a key role in developing Center initiatives.

The Center for Community Partnerships bases its work upon three areas of community service:

**Direct Traditional Service.** The Center coordinates approximately 6,000 University students, faculty, staff, and alumni involved in more than 300 Penn volunteer and community service programs. There are 30 student-run volunteer organizations and over 15 University-affiliated community service organizations active on campus. Each year, students log tens of thousands of hours volunteering in area community service programs and activities based across the University's four undergraduate and 12 graduate and professional schools.

**Academically-based Community Service.** Center activities also include those which are service-rooted with strong ties to teaching and participatory action research. These programs encompass problem-oriented research and teaching as well as service learning which emphasizes student and faculty reflection on the service experience. The Center is also involved in creating networks among other colleges and universities and building mutually beneficial relationships between these institutions and public schools throughout the area.

**Institutionally-related Service.** The Center helps Penn to function as a partner with community groups and institutions involved in community and economic development-related activity, including localized purchasing, job training and placement, and organizational capacity building. The Center's programs are designed to support neighborhood business organizations in West Philadelphia, helping the University to make a significant contribution to the quality of life in its community.

The area of community service at Penn that is under consideration by the Interactive Work Group is the second, academically based community service, i.e., service footed in and intrinsically tied to research and teaching. It is an approach that seeks to integrate the teaching, research and service mission of the university, and to stimulate intellectual integration across the university. The very nature of concrete real-world problem solving, particularly of university's immediate geographic community, encourage service

interschool and interdisciplinary cooperation. In order to further advance, the cooperative endeavor must include other institutions including public schools, businesses, government, community organizations, etc.

To work effectively in and with the community, a model of communal participatory action research has evolved. A communal participatory action research approach puts the focus on the real world and engages the researcher in an open, democratic, continuous learning situation designed to contribute to continuous problem solving.

This perspective particularly grew from Penn's experience in working with The West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC). The most advanced WEPIC site is the John P. Turner Middle School. Replication efforts are underway at Anderson Elementary and Sulzberger Middle Schools. The following describes these programs.

#### **A. Introduction**

The West Philadelphia Improvement Corps [WEPIC] is a school-based school and community revitalization project founded in 1985 that seeks to create comprehensive community schools that are the social, service delivery, and educational hubs for the entire community.

WEPIC's goal is to produce comprehensive community schools that serve, educate, involve, and activate all members of the community. Ultimately, WEPIC intends to help develop schools that are open to the public 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, functioning simultaneously as the core building for the community and as the educational and service delivery hub for students, their families, and other local residents. WEPIC originated in the spring of 1985 from an honors history seminar co-taught by Penn's president, Sheldon Hackney, and historians Lee Benson and Ira Harkavy on "Urban Universities-Community Relationships: Penn-West Philadelphia, Past, Present and Future, as a Case Study." Each undergraduate in that seminar focused his or her research on a problem in the West Philadelphia community.

While WEPIC began as a youth corps program it is currently a year-round program which involves over 2,000 children, their parents and community members in education and cultural programs, recreation, job training, and community improvement and service activities. It is coordinated by the West Philadelphia Partnership--a mediating, non-profit community-based organization composed of institutions (including the University of Pennsylvania) and community groups--in conjunction with the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition and the Philadelphia School District. Other partners in the effort include unions, job training agencies, churches, community groups, and city, state and federal agencies and departments.

The academic work done with the WEPIC Schools is based upon a community oriented, real world, problem-solving approach; activities are focused upon areas chosen by each school's principal and staff. In this neo-Deweyan approach, students not only learn by doing, but also learn by and for service.

The University and other community partners provide the resources that make each of the Community School programs possible. WEPIC is assisted by the University of Pennsylvania, VISTA Volunteers, local health institutions (including Misericordia Hospital, the Penn Medical Center, and Greater Philadelphia Health Action), and other community agencies and services.

While WEPIC works with 12 schools, the major site has been the Dr. John P. Turner Middle School--a majority African-American school with a sizable percentage of students from families that live below the poverty level. WEPIC programs are also well established at the West Philadelphia High School. Sulzberger Middle School and Anderson Elementary School and have design teams working on WEPIC replication.

## **B. John P. Turner Middle School**

### **1. School Day Program--The Health House**

#### **1.1 House Structure**

The WEPIC "House" (a middle school analog to a high school charter) has begun operations in the fall of 1993, building upon the themes and projects of the WEPIC school-within-a-school, which began in 1989 and involved four teachers and 120 students. The current House has 12 teachers and over 360 students, roughly one third of Turner's students, and is divided into four teachers and four classrooms for each of grades 6, 7, and 8. The overarching theme of the House is community health, around which a new curriculum is being developed and implemented on an ongoing basis, with the assistance of the Penn Graduate School of Education.

The House's goal is not only to improve students' basic skills and abilities to make healthy decisions, but also to help students become agents for change in their community and to be educators of their peers, family, and community members. The House's central projects are service learning activities, including peer education, community outreach and work-based learning. These activities are the integrating and motivating vehicles for the WEPIC curriculum, which uses community-oriented, project-based, team-taught, interdisciplinary units to teach academic and personal growth skills. Service learning--its preparation, service activities, and reflection--is integrated with the basic content areas of math, science, social studies, and language arts. The activities and the School District's curriculum reinforce

each other and are enhanced by their implementation through WEPIC's team-teaching, project-oriented, approach.

Career exposure, work-based learning and peer teaching activities are linked to the curriculum. For example, students keep journals about their experiences, and they interview and observe health care professionals at different levels and jobs, learning about health care delivery and training. In class, students make formal presentations and participate in group discussions based upon their journals.

### 1.2 House Curriculum - Thematic Overview

The 6th grade participates in nutrition and healthy habits education. The 7th and 8th grades build upon these health themes and participate in related service learning projects, including peer and cross-ages health education and community health promotion. All grades, but primarily the 7th, participate in the Community Health Watches (described below). Approximately 40 7th graders teach nutrition and healthy habits to other Turner students and to Turner's feeder elementary school children. All grades, but primarily the 8th, participate in a community history project. Approximately 40 8th grade students participate in work-based learning activities at local health institutions and businesses. All grades participate in career exposure programs which provide guest speakers and field trips. (See attached chart.)

### 1.3 Nutrition

All 6th grade students participate in a nutrition education program (generally aided and also taught once a week by students in Penn's anthropology department). Students learn about healthy nutrition habits, basic science relating to nutrition, and reading food labels. The anthropology department is working with the staff to create a nutrition curriculum for Turner that will be desktop published. This nutrition education program becomes the foundation for the students' future peer and community outreach projects.

### 1.4 Oral Health

The Dental School has screened all WEPIC students and run hygiene education sessions. The program is expanding this year to cover all 12 WEPIC classrooms. Additionally, the 6th grade classes will participate in a six week oral health education program that will culminate in a number of peer teaching and health promotion activities.

### 1.5 Peer Teaching

Approximately 10 students per 7th grade section (40 students) will participate in a peer teaching project at Turner's three feeder elementary schools. Turner students build upon their 6th grade learning and teach the

elementary students about basic nutrition and healthy habits. A Penn history course in the fall of 1993 on American National Character will work at the Turner Middle School to assist with the peer teaching program.

### 1.6 Community Health Watch

Seventh grade students learn about a community health topic each quarter and then host a Community Health Watch at Turner. Topics have included hypertension, nutrition, injury prevention awareness and home screening, cancer (breast, lung, and colon) detection and screening, HIV/AIDS education and screening, and drug and alcohol abuse. Students learn about the definitions, causes, risk factors, community prevalence, treatment, and preventive measures and healthy decisions relating to a particular topic and present that information in the classroom and community forums.

While the students educate their peers, family, and community members about healthy decisions and habits, WEPIC coordinates appropriate student and adult screenings and makes available professional advice relating to the Health Watch Theme. Services have included free, anonymous HIV screening during the AIDS/HIV Health Watch, and free breast cancer screenings and mammography vouchers during the Cancer Health Watch. Service providers have included the Penn Medical Center, Misericordia Hospital, Philadelphia's Injury Prevention Program, and BEBASHI (Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues).

A student from Penn's Graduate School of Education works with House staff (primarily 7th grade) as a health resources and curriculum coordinator, and an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Penn coordinates the efforts of the Penn Medical Center in staffing and providing technical assistance for Community Health Watch lectures and demonstrations, cultivates job-training sites at Penn's Medical Center, helps staff the Community Health Watch screenings, and serves as a resource for the development of Turner's health curricula.

### 1.7 Career Exposure

All 6th grade students will participate in an integrated curriculum unit based upon operating a school store. Selected 6th grade students will work in Turner's school supply store and learn the basics of a small business operation. All 7th grade students will be exposed to education careers through the peer teaching programs and guest speakers.

Approximately 10 students from each 8th grade section (40 students) will participate in a work-based learning project at local health care institutions, Misericordia and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (the program has also included Woodland Avenue Health Center), and the West Philadelphia High School/Philadelphia Tribune (Philadelphia's largest African-American newspaper) desktop publishing program.

Students in the allied health careers project rotate through various departments of a hospital (e.g. dietary, nursing, respiratory, community outreach, patient representative, and hospital administration), are assigned individual hospital-based mentors, and participate in discussions related to the education and training required for various hospital personnel.

Students participating in the Philadelphia Tribune/Desktop Publishing program publish a newsletter about their own experiences as well as about those of their 7th and 8th grade service-learning peers. These students will also help to generate the flyers, posters, and brochures for the Community Health Watches, as well as peer teach their skills to other 7th and 8th graders.

### 1.8 Community History

All 8th grade students will participate in an ongoing community history program assisted by students and faculty in Penn's Graduate School of Education and African-American Studies program.

### 1.9 Curriculum Development

The project for a course in the Graduate School of Education is to work closely with teachers at the Turner Middle School to develop thematic, integrated curricula. The curricula on injury prevention, community history, and starting a school store were developed in spring 93 and will be implemented beginning in fall 1993.

### 1.10 Tutoring

In the 1992-1993 school year, 18 graduate and undergraduate students provided tutoring in math, social studies, science, language arts, and the health programs, and assisted with the after-school motivation center.

### 1.11 Other Supports from Penn

In fall 1993 Afro-American Studies 400, "W.E.B. DuBois' Social Ideas," is assisting Turner staff in small group work within the classroom and in the development of an African-American history curriculum. In spring 1994 an undergraduate history course on "Community, Neighborhood, and Family in Ancient Athens and Modern Philadelphia" will focus on whether the study of ancient Athens can help solve the problems of modern Philadelphia. In spring 1994 an undergraduate injury prevention course in the Nursing School will help the 7th grade students host an Injury Prevention Community Health Watch.

## 2. After School Community School Programs

## 2.1 Peer Power Education

A peer education drama project aimed at preventing teen pregnancy and promoting prenatal and neonatal care has been funded for three years by a federal Healthy Start grant. A videotape of the performance, along with a playbill, students' discussion guide, and teacher guide, will be distributed to every middle school in the Philadelphia School District for classroom use. A dissertation student in folklore studying health beliefs is facilitating the project coordinating activities with community agencies.

## 2.2 Coping Skills

In Spring 1993, forty-five students at risk for depression and family conflict learned negotiation skills and cognitive techniques to improve their perspectives. They worked with a group of Penn graduate and undergraduate psychology students once per week after school throughout the spring semester. This project was part of a dissertation study in "learned optimism."

## 2.3 Motivation Center

The Center works with students after school and focuses on classroom and homework assignment assistance in order to improve students' attitudes and behaviors. Students are referred to the Motivation Center by staff, and student attendance is coordinated with parent support. Students work their way out of the program through improved classroom performance.

## 2.4 Enrichment Center

This after-school program provides special projects and enrichment activities for students with advanced academic standing or who are strongly motivated.

## 2.5 Cultural Enrichment

Students take field trips to points of interest and attend cultural events. Penn's Annenberg Center is working with us to provide ongoing theater education programs and ticket subsidies for events at the Center.

## 2.6 Landscaping

This after-school program cleans and beautifies the outside of the school, as well as plants and maintains the gardens behind the school. Students keep journals every day and engage in relevant science and math activities. A curriculum is being developed for use this fall. A Penn undergraduate in environmental studies is extending this program into a Saturday School class she is volunteer teaching.

## **2.7 Mentoring**

Twenty five female Penn medical students mentor 25 Turner girls in the basic subjects and also host regular activities such as slumber parties, trips to the Franklin Institute, and picnics. The group also discusses physical changes experienced in adolescence. A parallel male group is now forming. Two pharmaceutical companies have helped to defray the costs of the program.

## **3. Saturday and Wednesday School Programs**

These Schools offer free academic, cultural, and recreational classes to all residents of the Turner catchment area, though participants attend from a much wider area. Last year, students attending Saturday School came from 28 different schools. Classes have included Math, Creative Writing, Arts and Crafts, Basketball, Calligraphy, Ceramics, Cooking, Dance Aerobics, GED Preparation, Jazz History/African American Music, Martial Arts, Photography, Sewing, Swimming, and Water Aerobics. Saturday School is open to all ages, from children in day care to adults. Last spring the Saturday School had over 250 registrants. A Wednesday Evening School offers similar courses to adults over 18. Over 150 people registered for Wednesday Community School classes last year. Classes are taught by School District teachers, community members, and volunteers from the University of Pennsylvania.

## **4. Summer Institute Community School Program**

The Summer Institute is a comprehensive program for approximately 25 middle school students that helps develop new programs for the school year. The Institute provides an integrated approach to teaching work-based learning, career education, health education, and basic academic skills, as well as supervised afternoon recreation. This summer's Institute, WEPIC's fourth, was five weeks long and involved 23 middle school students, two Penn medical student interns in a Community Health Summer Internship program (which involves several area medical schools and is based upon Penn medical student participation in the first Turner-WEPIC Summer Institute), 10 undergraduate interns in a summer internship funded by the Scott Paper Company, 1 school administration intern from Cheyney University, and a WEPIC supervisor.

The medical students teach the classes and the undergraduates work as mentors with two or three students. Interns develop and implement a project-oriented, integrated curriculum where the Turner students educate their peers, family, and community members about community health.

The Summer Institute's work-based learning component exposes students to careers in the allied health fields through weekly trips to the Penn Medical Center and Misericordia Hospital. These work-based

learning experiences are reinforced through journal and reflection activities and exercises in the basic subject areas. The curricula developed during the summer is used during the school year at Turner.

## **5. Community School Support Programs**

### **5.1 Head Start**

Two WEPIC-initiated Head Start classrooms continue to operate very successfully at Turner.

### **5.2 Turner Community Advisory Council**

This group, comprised of local politicians, community members, and local institutional representatives, meets bimonthly to discuss WEPIC activities and offer recommendations for future programs, particularly Wednesday and Saturday Schools and various Turner community outreach programs.

### **5.3 The Social Health Program**

This program has workshops on self-esteem, family scripting, and conflict resolution. The program also assists the school counselor with crisis and follow-up counseling and provides home visits. The program has one full-time social worker and three part-time social work interns from Penn's School of Social Work. The Social Health Program operates under the direction of the school's principal.

### **5.4 Parent and Family Involvement**

WEPIC began this spring to contact students' families; over one third of the parents and/or caretakers came to our spring meetings. Teachers, parents, and students have developed ideas for cooperative projects. WEPIC involves students in this evening program. Currently, parents are planning workshops for the fall which will address topics identified as priorities by both teachers and parents. This program is coordinated by a dissertation student in education studying ways parents, teachers and families can work collaboratively for the success of students.

### **5.5 VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)**

This intergenerational program involves six VISTA Volunteers and several community volunteers. The Volunteers work with students in the work-based learning and feeder school peer teaching programs, as well as support the parent and family involvement program. In the last few months, WEPIC has made a concerted effort to set up working relationships with the community's churches and expects to have a large number of volunteer mentors and assistants this fall. The goal of the VISTA program is to set up a permanent, intergenerational volunteer network.

## **5.6 Other Penn Assistance**

Numerous students are also involved in community-related service projects which are indirectly related to their academic work. For example, a Sociology student is helping to map West Philadelphia's resources (social services, community organizations, commercial establishments, etc.).

### **C. Sulzberger Middle School**

#### **1. In School**

##### **1.1 Curriculum Design Teams**

With the assistance of a grant from the Corporation on National and Community Service and resources from WEPIC, Sulzberger has begun to replicate service learning along the lines of the Turner Middle School model. A part-time curriculum resource coordinator (a former Turner teacher now in Penn's Graduate School of Education) and a part-time field coordinator (WEPIC staff) have been provided as additional resources. To date, the design team has focused on issues of conflict resolution peer counseling and peer mediation.

#### **2. Saturday School**

Using the programs at Turner and West Philadelphia High School as models, the Saturday School program is being replicated through a grant similar to West Philadelphia High's. Like West Philadelphia High and Turner Middle School, cultural, academic and recreational classes will be offered. The program, which will focus on middle and high school-aged youth, was developed in collaboration with community leaders and the school's principal so that course selection and content would reflect as closely as possible the needs and desires of residents living the surrounding community.

### **D. Anderson Elementary School**

#### **1. In school**

1.1 The grant from the Corporation on National and Community Services also provides a curriculum resource coordinator for the Anderson Elementary School. The design team there has focused its attention on issues of African American cultural history and identity, especially the Harlem Renaissance.