

Building Capacity

Educating for Community Action

The nation's environmental future will, for the most part, be determined locally. National forces may encourage action through regulation, money, or information but Hometown, USA, is most often where the "rubber" of decision and action meets the "road" of environmental impact.

How can Cooperative Extension and US EPA help steer communities toward actions that protect and enhance the environment? Developing and using an education plan designed to match community interests will help these professionals support community initiatives and enhance community capacity to manage the environment.

This pamphlet briefly introduces Community-Based Environmental Education (CBEE), describes how agency professionals can link their skills to CBEE, and identifies needed tools and resources.

Effective Community-Based Environmental Education is defined by results: it leads to positive actions. To be effective, CBEE must be:

- **Local**
- **Collaborative**
- **Informed**
- **Active**

Applying a community-based approach is both an art and a sci-

ence. The art is in the educator's ability to notice and take advantage of community links and opportunities. The science involves applying skills needed for working with a coalition or group. How the approach is applied depends on the characteristics of the community and of the groups or agencies involved.

Local Base is Fundamental

Address a locally identified issue and work toward a positive outcome.

To address an issue or concern effectively, community members must recognize the link with their local interests and be able to find and use the resources they need to take action.

The most effective environmental education projects – those which lead to action and lasting change – are created in response to local concerns.

Sea Change in Philadelphia is an example. This non-profit group develops entrepreneurial solutions to local environmental problems. In one initiative neighborhood citizens sell trees for urban greening projects. The income supports community garden and nutrition education activities. Sea Change identified the need, audience, and education strategy, then sought help from Extension experts to provide horticulture training.

Being developed collaboratively with local community members helps community-based education programs :

- Identify and build on community strengths.
- Take advantage of timely events and opportunities.
- Collaborate with ALL interested groups including members of the target audience.
- Work toward a positive outcome.

Collaboration is Powerful and Practical

Work with a coalition or group, giving attention to techniques that support group effectiveness.

When time and money are in short supply – a chronic condition for most programs – it seems obvious that being efficient and focused are important.

Paradoxically, in Community-Based Environmental Education making efficiency and focus a primary approach may delay, or even derail, the program. Long-term improvement of environmental quality ultimately depends on building community capacity to devise and meet environmental management goals. This takes time.

Effective CBEE relies on someone who acts as an instigator. This person works with a local group or coalition to get something started and takes responsibility to keep things going. Instigators are often based in an agency, though they may be community members.

Two skills are crucial to these collaborative efforts: facilitating group progress using goal setting and consensus decision-making; and building partnerships, networks and teams. Effective CBEE leaders attend as much to group “process” objectives as to successfully addressing a substantive issue.

Content experts, who often have years of training in independent thought and research, may be relatively inexperienced with this type of collaboration. Training can help them learn it. However, facilitating group process involves a state of mind and a communication style as much as a set of skills.

Experts can increase their impact by working jointly with local leaders and educators who are skilled in and comfortable with group process.

CBEE project leaders or managers are also more effective when they know and apply strategic planning tools. These tools can help: identify vision or purpose; generate, organize, analyze, and prioritize ideas or issues; identify tasks and assign responsibilities; define and solve problems; perform assessments; collect data; monitor and evaluate programs.

Successful CBEE projects also:

- Communicate broadly using varied methods such as newsletters, town meetings, TV, festivals.

- Provide recognition and rewards.
- Operate flexibly, adapting to and taking advantage of opportunities as they occur.

Informed Action is Empowering and Productive

Take action based on information, within the context of community goals.

The product or outcome of an effective CBEE project has three parts: 1) informed action on a 2) substantive issue which leads to 3) lasting change. When one element is missing the effort can be wasted.

For example, some environmental education efforts produce lists of meetings attended, handouts distributed, and telephone contacts made. There’s been activity but no action. Alternatively, some actions produce no change because they lack appropriate local information needed for effective action.

A school stream improvement project, for example, may be a good field education activity but it may not improve riparian quality unless it is designed with help from natural resource professionals. Restoring a riparian area takes sophisticated understanding of local hydrodynamics and appropriate plant communities.

Information Needed for Effective Action

- Community wants and needs.
- Environmental, socio-economic conditions.
- Local strengths, skills and resources.

- Data about the particular issue of concern.

One surprisingly powerful and effective tool is to involve citizens in collecting and analyzing data. By combining new information with their understanding of local people and local preferences, community members can help develop action plans that will effectively motivate citizens to make a change or to continue a successful management approach. The key is making a clear connection between the effort and citizen wants and needs.

These techniques work most effectively when agency professionals actively respect, encourage, and reward the efforts of citizens and local groups, and when group accomplishments are publicized.

Successful CBEE actions also:

- Relate to long-term community vision and goals.
- Consider the community as a whole (history, culture, and economic or socio-political influences).
- Build on community resources and skills.
- Match the scope and complexity of the action to the community’s resources.

Finally, action and information must address a substantive issue that community members see as relevant. Outsiders, like US EPA and Extension staff, with different information and experience may be concerned about substantive issues that are not yet apparent to community members.

These professionals must meet the challenge of translating and communicating their concerns in ways which evoke genuine local concern and commitment. Otherwise real change is unlikely.

Effective Education is Active

Engage the broader group by using tested education practices

Community-based education implies an education plan created as a result of community involvement and designed to match community interests. Effective CBEE takes advantage of educational theory and research and uses tested techniques for promoting action and behavior change.

Elements of Effective Education Strategy

- Presents all points of view.
- Relates to a specific audience, its needs, and learning styles.
- Presents behavior choices that are relatively low cost in time, energy, money, and materials.
- Gives the audience opportunities for self-assessment and applying new skills.
- Uses creative approaches.

Many US EPA and Extension staff are resource specialists who may have little training in education theory and tools. Also, each expert's discipline has its own mindset and techniques. For example, a university-based person may see a situation as an information or research problem while a community activist sees an organizing problem and agency staff see an enforcement problem.

Effective practitioners recognize these biases and use education theory and research, such as understanding the learning processes of adults and youth, for example, to help counteract them. Rather than develop

expertise in a new field, agency professionals can collaborate with a skilled practitioner to devise programs that are effective with the target audiences.

Social marketing and the study of how innovations diffuse into society also offer useful insights. Well-tested environmental education research from both fields shows that two conditions are necessary for learning and change to occur: the education experience 1) presents behaviors which are similar to what people already do, and 2) provides immediate, observable consequences.

Training, a mainstay of many Extension initiatives, is effective when provided to individuals who have decided to become involved and when it addresses specific skills needed for managing the local issue.

CBEE Summary

- Effective CBEE is created in response to local concerns and builds on local strengths.
- CBEE programs are integrated into a community planning process and help strengthen citizens skills to plan with the environment in mind.
- CBEE programs are collaborative. Their leaders attend as much to "process" objectives as to outcomes.
- Collaboration requires active, consistent, continuing leadership.
- The desired outcome is informed action which leads to lasting change.
- CBEE uses tested theory, research and techniques to promote action and encourage new behaviors.

Roles for Professionals

A full-scale CBEE program is a major undertaking which relatively few Extension and US EPA professionals can do alone. However, their skills may be helpful at any stage of community environmental education and planning.

Some actions which can promote community-based environmental education are:

Demonstrate awareness of community issues, needs and concerns in programs or materials. Lead by personal example.

Link environmental issues to community issues with relevant examples and localized activities.

Tailor a program to **meet specific community needs** (jobs for youth, improved recreation opportunities, unsightly lake weeds) with the environmental topic as a parallel theme. Involve citizens in gathering and interpreting data.

Help citizens lead in planning education on a local environmental issue. Use behavior change research or social marketing.

Support local groups already working with citizens on any locally identified topic. Use or make opportunities to relate key environmental topics or management activities to their work. Help them develop data gathering and interpretation skills.

Encourage and facilitate activities that identify community needs and assets, relate to a local vision, and provide action steps for quality of life and the environment.

Developing Tools and Resources

Behind-the-scenes work can also help those who are working on environmental education in the community. Here are examples of some common needs:

Information

- Information about the economic, social and environmental costs of development and the economic costs of environmental protection strategies.
- Indicators to measure results of environmental management decisions.
- Demographic information.
- Environmental justice and health resources.
- Environmental education materials and training for urban settings.
- Information on funding sources.

Social Marketing

- Translate education goals into simple messages about easily accomplished actions.
- Develop packaged environmental education programs for specific audience needs/interests, such as basic boat maintenance linked to preventing pollution.
- Develop behavior preferences survey tools, sample behavior goals, potential barriers to preferred behaviors.

Information gathering

- Tools to combine local mapping and information gathering with community development activities.
- Tools and training in capturing/assessing community social and environmental indicators.
- GIS access and assistance.

Skills development

- Offer professional development for natural resource experts on: “localizing” public meetings, strategic planning, adapting knowledge/skills to community problem-solving, urban audience needs.
- Build capacity in local groups to continue programs themselves: organizing, assessing citizen needs/values, analyzing environmental trends/issues, getting technical assistance, preparing education programs, coordinating volunteers, working with media.
- Holistic approaches to issues needing integrated solutions; e.g. solving one farm problem may create other issues.

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