



A Website Partnering Schools and Community Members

By
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Abstract

Neighborhood transformation is defined here as positive ecological, social, and economic sustainable change that a neighborhood has determined is necessary for itself and is driven by itself. Neighborhood transformation hinges on key institutions to spur along its change. Schools, according to John Dewey and David Sobel, can embody the full potential of a community by serving as a public space where members can convene, identify problems, and develop solutions.

A school serving as a hub for its community has the unique ability to connect constituents. A school being a critical center of the community not only improves the quality of a student-body's academic performance¹, emotional development and recreation needs, but also strengthens the community at large. This paper prompts considerations into an education system based on a sharing economy model which is an ecosystem of interdependent stakeholders that form innovative collective action.

Partners are already filling in gaps in the education system such as additional playtime, life skills support, and helping students connect to business practices via internships. Moving beyond the public-private discussion, how can partners be better leveraged since they are already playing critical roles in the education ecosystem? I am interested in considering an education structure founded on the community school philosophy, the Commons, and partnerships between community members and schools creating a holistic *system of learning*. Relationships between schools and the community, I argue, explodes the education system into a *learning ecosystem*.

My project, *Beacon Partners*, makes locating and connecting schools and community members simple and fuss-free. I have designed the website to be an easily navigable one-stop-shop for schools looking for partners to fill in gaps in their curricula or support students with mentoring and recreational activities, as well as connect community members who want to be involved in their local schools.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the concept of *Beacon Partners*, breaks down the critical functions, and provides mockups of the website. The second section of the paper considers the key lessons learned from precedents. The third section provides the theoretical framework behind the concepts of the project as well as in depth looks into case studies.

Keywords: education system; school system; learning system; learning ecosystem; neighborhood transformation; community schools; the learning ecosystem; school and community partnerships.

¹ Benson, Lee. John L. Puckett, Ira Harkavy. *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform, Civil Society, Public Schools, and Democratic Citizenship*. (Temple University Press, 2007).

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Section 1: Beacon Partners

1.1 Introduction

Beacon Partners demonstrates my vision for establishing meaningful relationships between schools and community members. The idea is founded on the principle that integrating community members like local businesses, community centers, higher education institutions, non-profit organizations into a school system is not only beneficial to the school but for the community at large. The format is in-line with niche social sites, or vertical networks. These new social networks are focussed on peer-to-peer connecting, or in the case of *Beacon Partners* developing peer relationships where there may not have been a relationship before. *Beacon Partners* like many vertical networks, establishes connections in a trusted environment, popular in professional environments.

Beacon Partners is inspired in part by the place-based education model which Brad Allenby says is “knowledge of the nearest things should be acquired first, then that of those farther and farther off.”² Mapping resources such as local businesses (barber shops, cafes, supermarkets etc), organizations, community centers, parks, gardens, urban farms, higher education institutions etc. in neighborhoods quickly demonstrates how rich communities are and how much there is to offer. *Beacon Partners* is founded on the premise of community building and the philosophy of the community school but is not limited to it.

Many important relationships between schools and members that reside in different communities can prove to be very important in creating in students a deeper and larger sense of community, as well as provide an opportunity to develop critical thinking into the differences between communities and the systemic reasons for those differences. *Beacon Partners* understands that both kinds of relationships are important for developing minds and it is for this reason that the service provided by *Beacon Partners* helps schools make those decisions for themselves.

The project is envisioned as a website and the goal is to be a one-stop-shop for schools and partners to visit, gather information on potential partners, make introductions, and get support. The website serves two clients: schools and community members.

²Allenby, Brad. *The Ontologies of Industrial Ecology?* (Progress in Industrial Ecology, An International Journal 3.1-2, 2006).

1.2 Critical Functions

The website has three main critical functions.

1. Step 1: Home Page
2. Step 2: Getting in Touch
3. Step 3: Support

For the School

1. Step 1: Home Page. At this point, the school has identified the needs for a particular group of students and will select:
 - a. Zip code
 - b. Grade level
 - c. Hours student group has available
 - d. Programming time: After school, weekends or summer programming
 - e. Programming type: Art, sports, business, science, writing, music, or volunteer
2. Step 2: Getting in Touch
 - a. Locate potential partners in an area via a map
 - b. Easy communicate to partners
3. Step 3: Support
 - a. Educate and support on next steps of the partnership process through ratings, testimonials and reviews.

For the Community Member

1. Step 1: Home Page. The partner would have identified as a community member and would like to contribute to the community and will select:
 - a. Zip code
 - b. Service that can be provided: Art, sports, business, science, writing, music, or volunteer
2. Step 2: Getting in Touch
 - a. Locate potential schools in an area via a map
 - b. Easy communicate schools using the online messaging system which connects to the school's partnership coordinator
3. Step 3: Support
 - a. Educate and support on next steps of the partnership process through ratings, testimonials and reviews.

1.3 Beacon Partners Website

School Homepage

The school inputs their zip code, grade level of students, the kind of partnerships they are interest in and enter search.

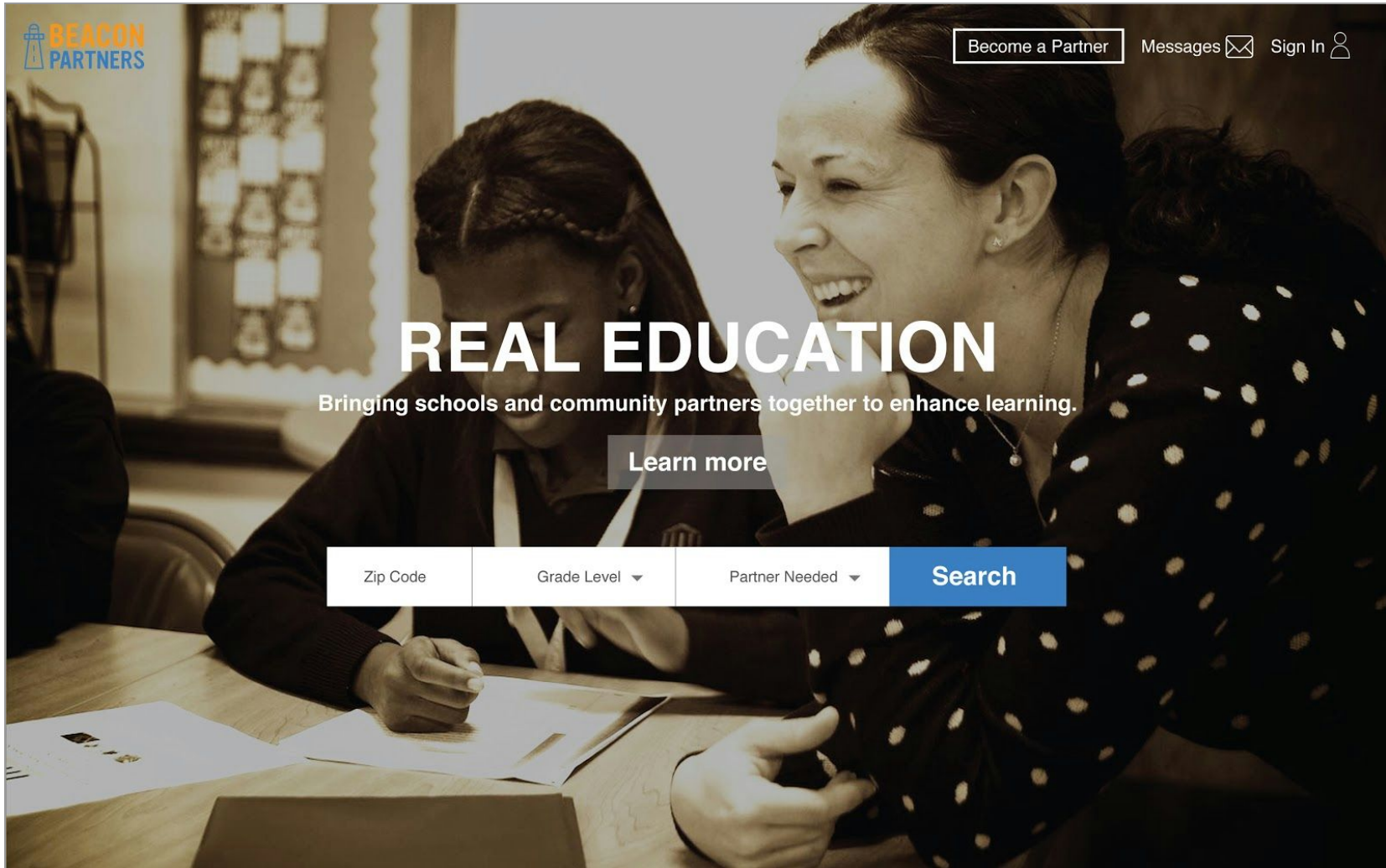


Figure 1

Map

Once the search is complete, the landing page is a map that shows the results from the search.

Boston, MA 02111

[Become a Partner](#) [Messages](#) [Sign In](#)

Age Range:

Program Type: Timing: Availability: Volunteer/Paid:

Spirit Advanced Fitness Fitness
 Teambuilding Individual Nutrition

Knucklebones
Tags: Teamwork, Fitness, Spirit

Big Kids Dodgeball
Tags: Teamwork, Fitness, Spirit

Stoked Mentoring Inc.
Tags: Mentoring, Life Skills, Study Groups

Trampoline Park
Tags: Fitness, Fun

Map showing search results in the Boston area. Locations marked include Somerville, Cambridge, Brookline, and Dorchester.

Figure 2

Connecting

The user can select the partner icon to learn more about the community member via a description, most popular activities, history of partnerships with other schools. A connect option allows for the user to send an introductory message to the organization.

Boston, MA 02111

[Become a Partner](#) [Messages](#) [Sign In](#)

Stoked Mentoring Inc.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.

Popular Activities:
Build n' Ride Skateboard School
Ocean Surf Academy
Snowboard Group Lesson

History:

Dorchester High School	May 2013
Brighton High	Aug 2014
The Park School	Mar 2015

Desired Date Range:

From: To:

[Connect](#)

GET STOKED!

ABOUT STOKED

Our mission is to inspire teens who are the most vulnerable, to believe in themselves through action sports. We do this by wave, building a skateboard, and gliding down snowy mountains can show teens that they are

Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Section 2: Precedents

2.1 Organizations, Trends, and Services

In developing *Beacon Partners*, a number of organizations, websites, and trends served to inspire and guide the design and practice of the site and service.

Aruba is a Hewlett Packard Enterprise company who has fully embraced the vertical networks trend and are offering services in higher education, healthcare, primary education, hospitality, government, financial services, and retail. *Aruba* offers insight into the direction of mobile technology as well as illustrated how much support there is for niche and professional online communities.

Zappos is an online retail store that is renowned for its customer service and streamlined operation. The user navigates through a number of drop boxes and a couple pages which prompt the user to consider and plug in their desired product. The filters in *Zappos* are sophisticated and detailed and offered insight into how specific or general a user would want to be with their search.

OkCupid was one of the first online dating websites. Launched in 2004, it offers social networking, friendship, and online dating in countries around the world. The site is also free, an important component, and supports instant and email messaging. The main take away from *OkCupid* was the homepage which has a streamlined approach to navigating the needs and desires of the user and aligning them quickly with a potential partner.

Airbnb is a website where people list, rent, and find private lodging. Most of the accommodation options are private residences which offers an alternative to formalized lodging such as hotels, motels, and hostels. People have the opportunity to “live” in the place they are traveling in. To date, the site has 1.5 million listings in 34,000 cities around the globe. The ease of inputting criteria of a user’s desired lodging paired well with *Beacon Partner’s* inputting of desires of potential partnerships. The mapping on *Airbnb* is detailed but elegant, and the information presented is up to date and correct - all of which are important factors when considering a site for schools and community member partnerships.

Idealist.org is an organization that utilizes a social media format to connect people to jobs, internships, volunteer opportunities, events, and organizations mostly in the non-profit, community service, and the public sector. The website says, “Idealist is all about connecting idealists - people who want to do good - with opportunities for action and collaboration.” The organization has 100,000 organizations listed and roughly 1.4 million monthly visitors around the world so it is extremely popular but users have expressed that

connectivity isn't as dynamic as it could be and users who have signed organizations up have experienced delays in publishing and approval from the organization's operating office. The concept demonstrates that there is indeed a desire expressed by a large number of people interested in social good and community work and a desire to connect to others who share the same values - all critical when evaluating the concept of *Beacon Partners*. The social media integration for an independent user on *Idealist* website qualifies the site as personal yet for organizations, a formalized and standardized formatting of organization pages leaves little opportunity to customize. *Beacon Partners* hope to eliminate formalize the experience while still providing customizability.

Boston Youth Zone is an initiative out of Mayor Marty Walsh's office and is part of *Boston Centers for Youth & Families* and the *Division of Youth Engagement and Employment*. The website, www.youth.boston.gov, has a section where people interested in learning more about youth engagement and employment, can call and speak to teen "peer listeners" who offer information about activities and opportunities in the city. The initiative also has an online database of 4,000 programs which produces monthly updates to 30,000 residents. *Boston Youth Zone* attempts, though not fully, to function as a clearinghouse for programs across Boston: you can say what you want and it will produce desired outcomes. Feedback from users say the database is largely not helpful because the search process is difficult, the data is largely out of date or incomplete, and businesses/schools have to register themselves and do a lot of legwork. *Beacon Partners* hopes to provide a similar service in the form of a clearing house but one that functions more as a connector of parties in a streamlined, accurate, elegantly designed, and up to date environment.

2.2 Key Lessons Learned

The most important element in connecting schools and partners on a website/database is producing information that is up to date and complete. Only then is it useful. Sophisticated GIS and mapping systems along the lines of *Airbnb* would need to be incorporated. While this can be a costly service, it is critical that users engage in information that is accurate and up to date.

The second most critical elements for connecting schools and partners is the critical point at of figuring out whether the partner fits in with the school's mission and philosophy. This alignment is traditionally handled during the initial in-person meetings between partners and schools, and is fleshed out during the service. *Beacon Partners* allows for the alignment of interests to happen earlier in the relationship during the initial email connection, the follow up meeting, and also in the tagging, (see Figure 6). Schools can search tags of community members whose ethos is in line with their own. For example, if teamwork is an important element that a school is trying to incorporate into the middle and high school after school activities, *Big Kids Dodgeball* could be an option. The point is that right from the start, community members are able to evaluate their own strengths and communicate them straight away. This removes a step in the process and saves time.



Figure 6

Finally, gathering the data and the maintenance is a critical question. Initially the information would need to be plugged in manually via the site manager and team. Alternatively, the person signing up the organization or school would make an account profile but this requires legwork on the community partner's end which is a barrier. Ultimately, the information would be automatically updated via other sites such as *Yelp*, *LinkedIn*, *Idealist.org*, etc and a school or organization representative can edit and customize the profile to suit their needs and desires.

Section 3: Appendix

3.1 Literary Background: The Commons

“Commons can mean anything that’s available to all takers for at most a nominal fee. It can be a work of timeless literature no longer under copyright. It can be an invention of enormous societal value on which a patent either expired or was never claimed. It can be the air we breathe, or the water we drink. It can be an experience we all go through, such as childhood or old age. It can be the absence of something we hate, like noise. It can be Wikipedia. It can be an ocean beach. It can be free Wi-Fi. The commons is a realm that lies outside conventional market economics, but that nonetheless creates wealth—sometimes monetary, sometimes spiritual or psychic—for us all.” - Jonathan Rowe³

Schools are commons. As an institution and a system of learning, schools hold immense value because they teach us language, mathematics, and systems of the world. But schools also form our foundational experiences of society and beliefs of others. They are spaces where society and home meet and are bound. But schools also binds society at large through children. Through a synthesizing of values, beliefs, and vision of the future, schools represent a future and the school is a space where these futures are made.

David Bollier defines commoning as a set of “social practices by which commoners set their own rules and take responsibility for governance and results.”⁴ This is an ideal that some schools have expressed as the position and agency many schools would be happy to embrace. Partnerships present a way to support academics as well as allow entry points for a commons: a space that is created by and belongs to the community, and one that represents and includes the larger community. Including partners of a community into a school’s community, the school space is not only open to the public which includes private, public and government organizations, businesses, and institutions, but also represents the public.

3.2 Case Study: Young Achievers Science and Math Pilot School, Mattapan MA

Young Achievers Science and Math Pilot School (Young Achievers) serves 526 students from Pre-K - 8th grade who are selected in a lottery system. The school is one of eleven pilot schools in Boston that were founded in response to the Massachusetts Educational Reform Act of 1993. The goal of the school is to develop a model of education that values academics, community activism, and

³ Rowe, Jonathan. *Our Common Wealth: The Hidden Economy That Makes Everything Else Work*. (Berrett-Koehler Publishers; 2013).

⁴ Bollier, David. *Viewing Education as a Commons*

partnership with the city, and ultimately disseminate its best practices to other schools.

Over the years, many longstanding partnerships with local and national organizations have developed to assist with supporting academics as well as teach students about the local community and community activism. The partners diversify the curriculum and support the school. For example, The Harvard Arboretum is a partner that hosts natural science classes on its premises. Other partnerships include: The Children’s Services of Roxbury, Boston Teacher Residency, The City School, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Full Service Community School Round Table, Mattapan Community Health Center, Berklee College of Music, Playworks, Sportsmen’s Tennis and Enrichment Club, The Harvard Arboretum, and, Friends of the Children.

3.3 Case Study: Boston Preparatory Charter Public School, Hyde Park MA

Boston Prep serves 415 students from grades 6-12 who are selected in a lottery system. The school also serves 140 alumni who are all in college. Boston Prep’s goal is to “effectively prepare students for college and life” and 100% of graduates have been accepted to four-year colleges, with 85% of alumni currently persisting in college.

Boston Prep provides rigorous academic training in an environment that focuses on math and science. Boston Prep’s partners offer service, real world/career, and artistic/other enrichment. College partnerships are a different kind of category and are supported on a one-on-one matching basis with students. The key point in developing a partnership is evaluating whether potential partners fit with the mission which is: college persistence preparation and developing ethical virtue. Current partners include run clubs and a music partnership that teaches clarinet lessons. Seniors are required to do off-site enrichment in the form of community service, art or sports.

3.4 Case Study: Stoked Mentoring Inc., Brooklyn NY

Stoked is a nonprofit organization whose work hinges on the problem of the opportunity gap and aims to bridge it by leveraging action sports to enrich young people’s lives after school and on weekends. Stoked offer various action sports such as snowboarding, skiing, or skateboarding classes throughout the year in New York and Los Angeles. The staff of instructors often bring along guest speakers who expose their students to various companies, careers, and even opportunities - some of which have led to internships. A recent development is matching the professional skills of the instructors (who hail from a range of careers) to the interests of the students. For example, a recent program taught students marketing and advertising in the music industry by an instructor who worked in this industry and developed a collaboration with Zoo York.

Schools learn about and integrate Stoked in three ways: a student who has been exposed to Stoked and lobbies their teachers and principal to bring the nonprofit onboard; via Stoked outreach initiatives; and via word of mouth in the education community. Schools always promote their relationship with Stoked to potential students, parents, and donors. An instructor sums up the experience for students as: “I’m here for you, I’m here to listen to you, and we’re going to have some fun.” In the process, instructors help teach students communication and time management, and focus on building self esteem and going to college. Staff also offer study halls for student groups. As a result, grades improve.

3.5 Case Study: Knucklebones Inc., Somerville MA

Knucklebones is a for-profit company that partners with schools and offers organized group activities and play to students during and after school time. Many schools lack the space, training, and equipment and *Knucklebones* aims to fill the gap by transforming school spaces into tailored playspaces that include gymnastics, dance, music, and yoga. The organization is based in Somerville, MA and have a branch in Los Angeles, CA.

Knucklebones is based the idea that playtime is critical to personal and social development and their philosophy is founded in “choice theory” which encourages decision making and confidence building. The organization's motto is “practice makes progress”. The instructors are mostly college graduates with varying degrees of athletic skills and most of whom have worked with children.

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