

Project Ujima: Year One Evaluation Findings

Evaluation Commissioned by the Akron
Neighborhood Trust

Diane L. Morehouse, President QED
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The Akron Neighborhood Trust: Year One Evaluation Findings

Diane L. Morehouse, President QED
Evaluation Consultant

Findings Overview

Project Ujima, just concluding its first year of support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, is achieving success in engaging residents of the Buchtel cluster in a process of democratic dialogue aimed at identifying activities, programs and services to be implemented in four new Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in the Buchtel cluster.

The Akron Neighborhood Trust, with a cadre of 38 trained community moderators, and over 200 participants, has facilitated a new community discussion and engagement process designed to create higher levels of community engagement, implement new norms of interaction and foster new leadership. There are indications that participants have been empowered to speak up in community decisions, and that new leadership is being developed.

Buchtel cluster residents have created a collective vision, participated in three dialogues in each of four CLC's, identified one or two community priorities for services, programs or activities to be launched in each center, and are now working in Research Action teams to identify partners, decide the goals and outcomes of the service, program or activity, find resources and develop implementation plans. Teams are working now and implementation of the community's priority activity is planned for fall, 2012.

This process of community engagement is considered necessary to challenge norms of distrust, and disengagement, and to find solutions to pressing community needs. Key participants believe that the process has, thus far, achieved remarkable success. While challenges remain, persons involved in Project Ujima, believe that it is capably led, appropriately designed, and highly likely to result in needed services and activities and changes in community process, community engagement and community leadership.

This is a report of findings from an external evaluation of the first year of the Knight Foundation-supported Project Ujima. The evaluation was launched in February, and was built on methods described in a concluding appendix. In the report, we describe the context of this project, including its challenges and opportunities, briefly describe how the process has unfolded and incorporate data on participation, the training of its core group of moderators, and participant assessment of the process. Consistent with a program-improving approach, the report offers the observations of key informants, community leaders and persons who either have not participated or have participated irregularly. The report concludes with early evaluator observations on the overall efficacy of the process.

Project Ujima: Early Findings and Observations

Findings and Outcomes	
Creating a needed framework for community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitalized on assets and opportunities in the Buchtel community and the new Community Learning Centers • Challenged norms of distrust and disengagement • Provided a structure for ordinary citizens to be involved in deliberation and decision-making • Created a process that allowed all voices to be heard
Accomplishments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained 38 highly skilled community activists as moderators and 8 students as Student Voice Facilitators • Crafted a community-wide vision statement described as a powerful vision for the community • Engaged over 200 cluster residents in dialogue • Developed action priorities for each CLC • Launched 4 Research Action teams to research models, create goals, develop partnerships, identify resources and develop implementation strategies
Early Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation leading to greater empowerment • Emerging leadership • An emergent model
Challenges and Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating awareness and building participation (branding) • Demonstrating results • Funding support for implementation

The Challenge

The Buchtel community is a largely African-American, neighborhood in West Akron. The community has been hard hit by the economic downturn, unemployment is high and economic opportunity elusive. New businesses are reportedly reluctant to locate in the community given ongoing concerns about public safety.

Educationally, there is a very high rate of transfer out of the public schools, particularly Buchtel High School, to charter and parochial schools. As one person said, the residents “vote with their feet.” Many also believe that trust between residents and the school district is poor. There are ongoing tensions between the community and the school district, and there are widespread perceptions of inequitable distribution of school resources. This tension over the quality of education and the inequitable distribution of education resources was exemplified in the Williams-Bolar case in which a mother was charged for illegally transferring her children to another school district. According to knowledgeable informants, considerable resources have been expended in the cluster, and a variety of innovations tried, with limited success.

Turfism is described by many as an issue in the community, with many programs operating in isolation and sometimes at cross purposes. Additionally, relationships between citizens and elected/appointed officials are often contentious, grassroots neighborhood leadership is aging, and the social infrastructure of a once vibrant community has been weakened.

In 2011, the Akron Neighborhood Trust brought what is now called Project Ujima into the Buchtel cluster, launching a new way for citizens to come together to address these and other challenges in public education and community life. While the challenges are very real, the organizers of the project believe that there are many significant opportunities for change, and that the conditions have seldom been so ripe for a new model of community engagement to succeed.

The Opportunity

The Buchtel cluster, like other clusters in the Akron Public Schools, is the beneficiary of new school facilities, constructed as a result of a successful local income tax levy increase. The new schools, called Community Learning Centers (CLCs), are intended to serve not only the educational needs of children, but also the social and educational needs of the larger community. There is considerable interest in the neighborhoods in finding ways to make the community promise of the CLCs a reality. While some suggest that school enhancement programs have not helped, some of these efforts, like Project GRAD, have made headway in improving student achievement and graduation rates, and there is a very active PTA.

In addition to the increased interest in improving education in the Buchtel cluster, there are a number of reasons why project organizers believe that Buchtel is the “ideal laboratory to test the potential benefits of a new process of engagement.”¹ There is both a need, and an

¹ Application to the Knight Foundation from the Akron Neighborhood Trust

opportunity, for new community leadership, and an engaged group of young African-American males has stepped forward to propose new solutions to ongoing issues and problems. Data suggest that some of the older community leaders are “burned out,” and willing to work with a new generation of leaders.

Importantly, persons in positions of power and influence are supportive of, and involved in, this new process of community dialogue and engagement. A cadre of community activists and leaders has accepted the challenge of moderating the dialogues. Other community leaders, including elected city councilpersons and key leaders in the Akron Public Schools, are fully supportive of this process as a more effective way of collective problem-solving.

The Process

Project Ujima is built on a well documented foundation of experience in fostering public discourse. It is built on the idea that everyday citizens can work together effectively to enhance decision-making, and should work together in ways that can benefit communities. It is predicated on the notion that experts and professionals no longer have singular responsibilities for governance, but must share those responsibilities with citizens. The process employs deliberative dialogue, defined below as:

“Deliberative dialogue differs from other forms of public discourse — such as debate, negotiation, brainstorming, consensus-building — because the objective is not so much to *talk* together as to *think* together, not so much to reach a conclusion as to discover where a conclusion might lie. Thinking together involves listening deeply to other points of view, exploring new ideas and perspectives, searching for points of agreement, and bringing unexamined assumptions into the open.”²

Project Ujima incorporates the following components, as articulated in the literature on deliberative democracy:

- Extensive outreach and marketing to community organizations and citizens to encourage the broadest possible participation;
- Staged, structured, facilitated large and small-group meetings using democratic deliberative dialogue to develop a vision, to offer ideas, deliberate on their merit, and come to consensus for one priority action;
- Opportunities for participants to share experiences and values, and to consider a wide range of opinions, and options for action;
- Facilitating groups that move participants from talk to action.

² London, Scott. Thinking Together: The Power of Deliberative Dialogue. <http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/dialogue.html>

Project Ujima Components³

Moderator Training. Following an extensive recruitment process, a group of 38 community activists and leaders of varying backgrounds and experiences were trained in the theory and practice of deliberative dialogue. Eight students were also trained as student voice facilitators. Training took place over a six-week period in late summer and fall of 2011. The moderator training was built on a detailed curriculum and two-part Moderator Guide. An assessment of the quality of moderator training begins on page eight.

Community Kick-Off. In October, approximately 90 persons attended a Kick Off event at Buchtel High School. The event was intended to introduce Project Ujima to the community and to develop a guiding vision statement for the process.

Community Dialogues. From November, 2011 through February, 2012, a three-part Dialogue Series was held in each of the four Buchtel Cluster CLCs: a combined Buchtel/Perkins discussion series (in preparation for the opening of the new Buchtel CLC in fall of 2012), Helen Arnold, Crouse and Schumacher. The goal of this first series of dialogues was for participants to find common ground on a program, service, or activity they would like to implement in their CLC, and which would help to fulfill the community vision. Findings from interviews and focus groups on the quality and outcomes of the community dialogue process begin on page 12.

Dialogue One: Following introductions and review of the Vision Statement, participants were asked to share their ideas about programs, activities and services they would like to see in or coming from their Community Learning Center, and, how those ideas related to the community vision. (November, 2011)

Dialogue Two: Participants discussed the pros and cons of the ideas generated in dialogue one and the trade-offs in implementing each idea. (November-December, 2011)

Dialogue Three: Participants were guided through a process of finding common ground on the one program, service or activity they determined to be most “doable” and most important to meet the community vision. (February, 2012)

Community-wide Action Forum. Each CLC site reported out on the common ground reached for a priority program, service, or activity at each site and Research Action Teams were formed to implement those actions. Participants also assessed progress to date. (March, 2012)

Research Action Teams. Teams have been formed at each of the CLCs to identify similar existing programs and resources, assess the effectiveness of existing programs, recruit additional partners, identify goals for and costs of the service, activity or program, and develop an implementation plan. Teams are currently working (June – August) and will report progress in fall, 2012.

³ Project Ujima is named after the third principle of Kwanzaa. “The principle of *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility) teaches that we must build the good and sustainable communities, societies and world we all want and deserve to live in.” www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org

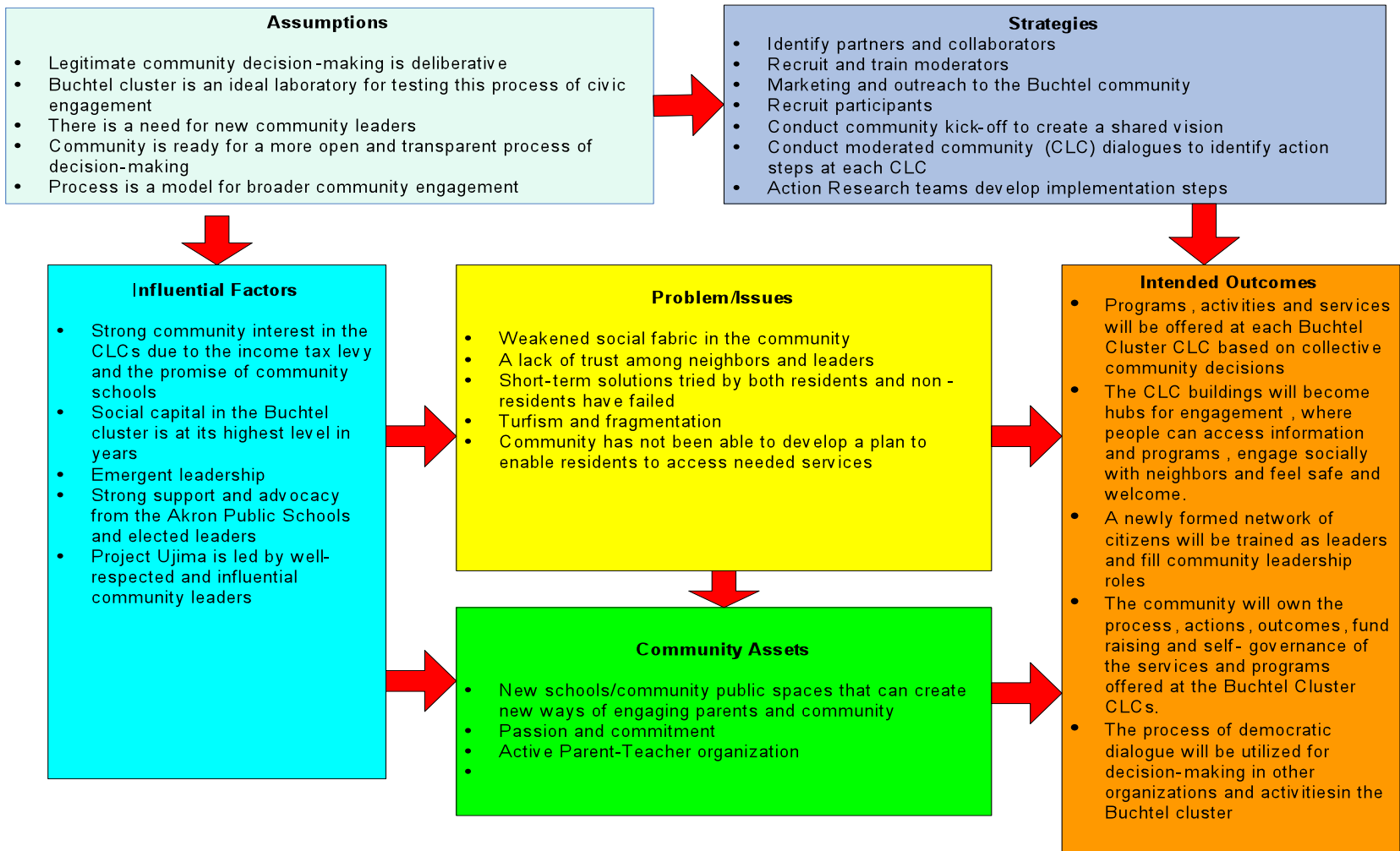
Action Priorities

The action priorities that emerged from each discussion circle, and on which Action Research Teams are currently working, are listed below

Community Learning Center	Action Priority	Number of Team Members
Helen Arnold	Financial Literacy and Economic Planning	15
Buchtel	Culturally Relevant Career and Vocational Education, College Readiness Programming/Services.	19
Crouse/Buchtel Combined	African-Centered Book Study and Knowledge-of-Self Education	24
Schumacher	Community Communications; Improving Sharing information; Facilitating Referrals for Help, Services and Commerce; Building Bridges	31

These components, along with assumptions, contextual factors and influencing forces, and intended project outcomes, are described on page seven as the project's Theory of Change.

Project Ujima Logic Model: Theory of Change



Evaluation Findings: Moderator Preparation

Moderators are key to the success of the deliberative dialogue process; helping to increase participants' awareness of the range of valid perspectives on issues, working groups through decision-making, insuring that everyone's voice is heard and that participants find common ground.

In late summer and early fall, 2011, thirty-eight community stakeholders participated in a 15-hour training session conducted over six weeks, where they learned the skills of moderating discussions based on deliberative democratic principles. Eight High School Student Voice facilitators also went through training to help bring the student voice into the discussion circles. A sample (12/30%) of moderators was interviewed during the last six weeks, either by telephone or in-person. Participants were asked a series of questions about the quality of the training, and their level of preparation for, and comfort in, leading the community dialogues.

High Quality and Level of Moderator Preparation

The moderators universally affirmed that the training was of high quality, and the training materials of value for both understanding the process and as a guide (script) for it. Most were highly complimentary of the level of ongoing support from the Project Ujima organizers, both themselves experienced moderators. The following direct quotes illustrate participants' very affirmative views on the overall quality of the training.

- **Nine on a scale of one to ten.** "I would say that I was about a nine. I thought the training was very, very good. I felt very prepared, if I had been one of the ones selected to be ... I was an alternate. But, had I been selected I felt pretty comfortable. I would have been a little nervous, but, other than that, I would say that on a scale of one to ten [it was]... a nine."
- **Outstanding.** "Well, I think that the training they did was outstanding. I think the training prepared individuals for the process. I think overall the training ... I think they did an excellent job on that."
- **Training was great.** "And, I felt that the process ... the training content was great. I thought the process was great. I think that the facilitation was great."
- **A sense of empowerment.** "I think it gave people a sense of empowerment. So, I think the training was great."

Accommodating a Range of Experience

Several moderators noted that there was a fairly wide range of previous experience with group facilitation among the trainees, meaning that some felt less confident than others. Participants suggested that allowing one person to conduct the dialogue and a second to take notes

provided options for the experienced and less-experienced, and allowed less experienced moderators more opportunities to observe.

- **Worked for the experienced and the less experienced.** “The way that they had it set up with two persons ... one actually doing the dialogue, and the other was taking notes, so that your team could always divide itself up. And, those who felt more comfortable, actually doing the speaking, and, the leading the group, would do that. And, the others then learn on the job, to the point where they felt more comfortable with that. So, I thought that that in terms of training and, in terms of getting ready to actually go into the actual sessions ... I think the setup was good... So, I’m saying that I think that the way that the training was set-up was good, for all those ... both the experienced persons, and, the inexperienced. Because they were able to grow right along with the process.”
- **Roles for the less experienced.** “Yeah, I think they just probably needed more time to practice. But, I think how they compensated for that was trying to put like a stronger facilitator with someone who may not have felt as comfortable. And, also, the different roles that the facilitators were able to, for example saying “well, I just want to be the recorder this time, and, not be the person actively facilitating the dialogue.” So, I think it was nice that it gave people some options.”

Learning a New Way of Working in Groups

Many of the moderators noted that they found the process of democratic dialogue very new, very different than past practice, and somewhat difficult to master. Several said they didn’t understand it well until they observed it in practice. Most of the moderators noted that it has been similarly difficult for community participants to become familiar with an essentially new way of interacting with others.

- **This isn’t traditionally the way conversations go.** “I think the training was thorough. I think that after the training the issue, in my mind, became “okay, you bought into this process ... now it becomes an education thing for the community because this isn’t traditionally the way that conversations go.” And, probably any other group that I go to ... they’re still going to be sitting around a table debating. And, then, that, of course, leads to discourse, and, people say “well, my idea wasn’t taken.” And, then everybody splits, and, then, nothing gets done. And, it starts over again, and, then, three months, six months, nine months, under a different name.”
- **Opportunities to experience deliberative dialogue.** “While I have had a great deal of experience before, the way of the deliberate process was new for me. And, old habits die hard, so I’m used to putting a bunch of people in a room, asking pertinent questions, and, letting them go at it. So, the deliberative process, it was kind of like “oh, you know, okay. Make sure everybody is heard. Nobody dominates the conversation.” So, I want to say I think the education was good. I think, probably, still my first one ... it still hadn’t clicked. It didn’t click, for me, until probably the second time I was observing in a group, and, saw the process working.”

- **Learning to live the process.** “They did a very thorough job. But, I think the issue is it’s so new ... it’s so new. Not living it, and, really being immersed in it, made it challenging.”

Excellent Access to Assistance and Ongoing Support

When queried about the extent to which they had access to ongoing support, moderators were enthusiastic in their praise of the level of support and assistance provided by the Akron Neighborhood Trust. Both the quote below, and the “Word Cloud,” built directly from open-ended responses, illustrate the quality of the assistance moderators have received. As one said:

- **The absolute best.** “First of all, Crystal, and, Susan are the absolute best. Absolute best. The paperwork that they provided us with, and, the ...just ongoing. The contact that they give us is just superb. Better than any that I have ever been in contact with.”



Enhancements and Improvements in Moderator Training – More Practice

Moderators suggested that more opportunities for practice would assist them in their role. They have valued opportunities to sit in on other groups and learn from other moderators, but would still appreciate “more tools for the toolbox.” About half of the moderators interviewed indicated they would have welcomed welcome more opportunities for practice; particularly

those who felt less confident. It likely can't be over-emphasized that deliberative dialogue is a new skill for people and requires observation and experience. A refresher training with mock dialogues – perhaps before dialogues at the CLCs start back up in the fall – might be welcomed.

- **More training for the less experienced.** “Some people were just natural. Some people just got up there, you know, “this is what we are, and this is what we do, and this is why you're here ... blah, blah.” And, some people are just not that comfortable. I mean, me first. I really would have preferred more practice. So, maybe you do the training, and, then you do another training for those who feel that they need to have a little bit more.”
- **More practice.** “And, I think we could have tightened that up a little more by ... and, I went to some additional workshops that they held. We could tighten that up a little more, and that would give us more practice before we met with our groups. Yeah, just a little more. Just walk through the paces. Getting some tough questions thrown at us, and, then handling them.”
- **More practice.** “I think it would have nice if we as moderators could have had more opportunity to do mock training. I don't think we had a chance to actually act like we were facilitating. We changed off on different roles, and, I think more time should have been spent preparing us. Not that we weren't prepared, but, there's always that confidence level... So, maybe you do the training, and, then you do another training for those who feel that they need to have a little bit more.”
- **More tools in the toolbox.** “I mean if we were going to have a session with just the moderators, in which the objective is to fine tune our toolbox ... to discuss the problems we had during this year's session ... because we're getting ready to go into other sessions, in which we are going to be more on our own than without Crystal, and, Susan there. I would think that just as we had the initial moderator training, I do think that we do need to get together ... the moderators need to get together to get trained. And, even in terms of what is the expectation as we go forward. Because we're going to need different tools in this work that we're doing for the different session. We're not going to use the same exact format.”

Evaluation Findings: Discussions and Dialogues

Community-wide Kick-off and Vision Statement

As noted, on October 13, the project was launched with a community-wide meeting involving approximately 90 persons. Using a process introduced to organizers by moderator, Terrence Kwabena Shelton, the group arrived at the following vision statement:

“We envision a community that values diversity and maintains high standards in a safe and nurturing environment that builds independence and economic self-sufficiency, while educating our community in the knowledge of self and promoting a healthy quality of life for all throughout the life cycle.”

The vision statement is posted and reviewed at every dialogue. In the Judging Our Progress session held on March 29, one of the community participants praised this vision statement: “The vision statement we created. I think that’s powerful because it allows us to stay focused as a cluster on what it is we are trying to accomplish.” Yet another community leader said of it: “The whole vision statement – it was a beautiful thing.” One of the moderators echoed these observations suggesting that the vision statement is itself a significant accomplishment of the project:

- **A great accomplishment.** “I think it’s powerful that we came up with this vision statement. I would like to see it on some billboards so that people can start seeing that. Because everything is going to flow from that. I think if even we can get that done soon it will be a great accomplishment. That will be one thing that will demonstrate that yes, they’re doing something.”

Community Dialogues

From November, 2011 through February, 2012, a three-part Dialogue Series was held in each of the four Buchtel Cluster CLCs: combined Buchtel/Perkins, Helen Arnold, Crouse and Schumacher. The goal of this first series of dialogues was for participants to find common ground on a program, service and activity they would like to implement in their CLC, which would help to fulfill the community vision.

Community Participation

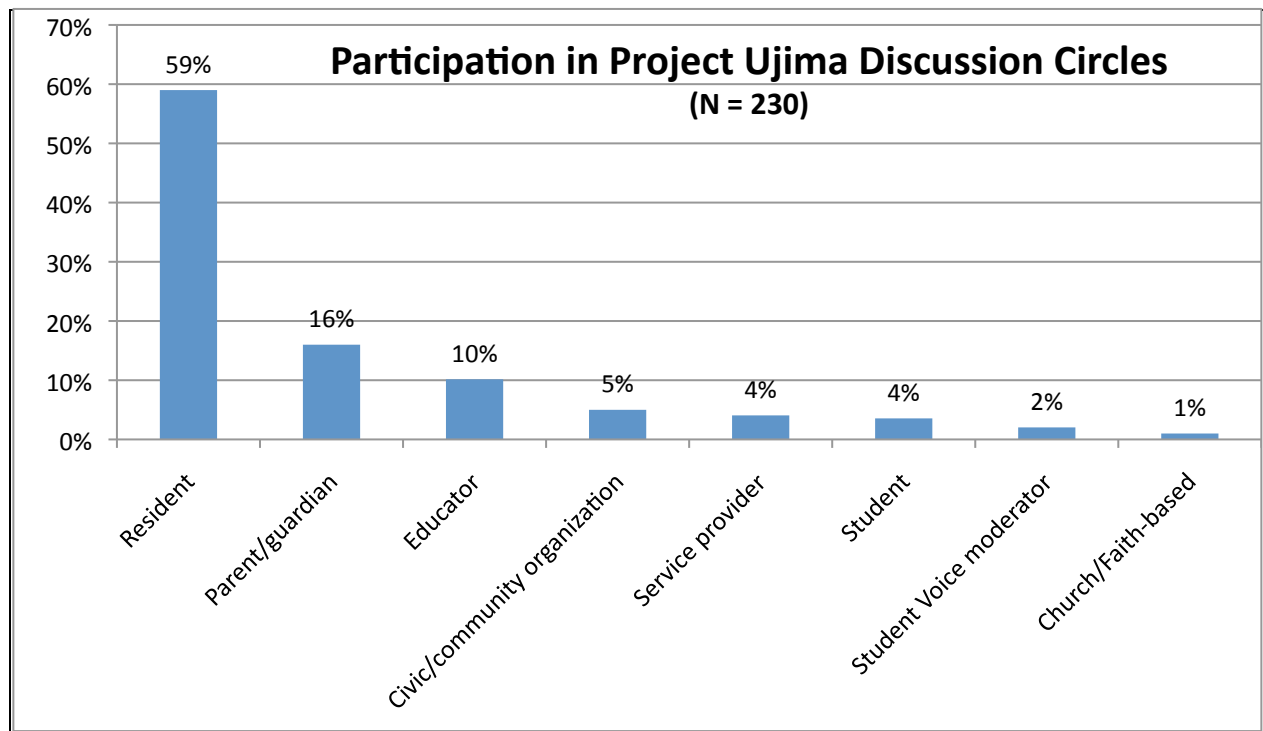
A total of 234⁴ persons signed up to participate in the community dialogues. Participants were able to sign up in various locations and through various points of contact. Recruitment of participants was intensive, including door hangers, phone calls, flyers, personal letters, and media including radio and local newspapers. Of the 234 persons originally indicating an intent to participate, 60 (26%) did not participate in any of the three (four at Helen Arnold) sessions.

⁴ Based on staff-developed Participation Database

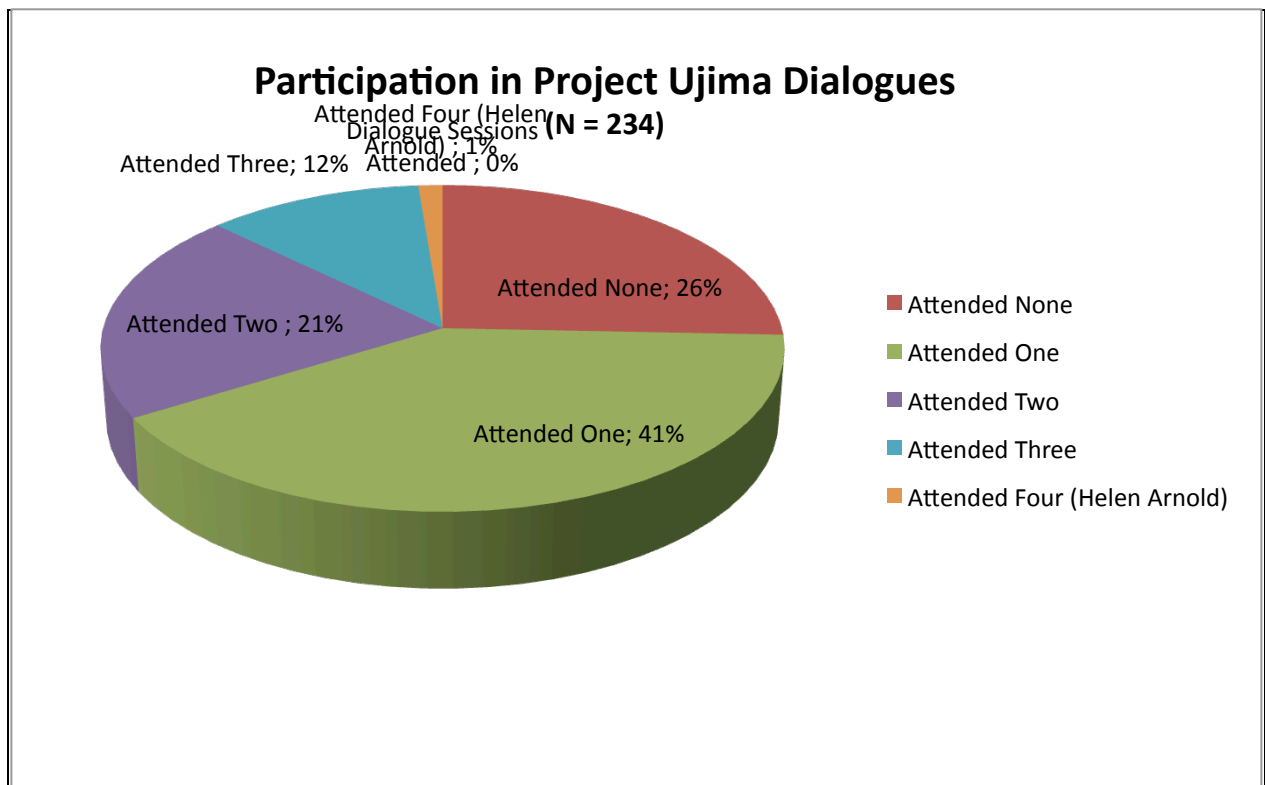
Participation by CLC for each dialogue is listed below. Nearly 100 residents turned out for the first dialogue; numbers dropped by 10 – 15% in subsequent dialogues. Average participation was slightly above 20 across the four CLCs.

	Helen Arnold	Buchtel-Perkins	Crouse	Schumacher	Total	Mean
Dialogue 1	19	41	21	14	95	23.8
Dialogue 2	18	42	13	12	85	21.3
Dialogue 2b	14				14	N/A
Dialogue 3	16	30	21	22	89	22.3

The majority of community participants were listed in the database as primarily residents of the Buchtel cluster. Sometimes other categories were given, such as parent, service provider, student. The evaluator used the other categories to define other participant roles, and so it is highly likely that these categories over-represent “residents” and under-represent other roles. If considered appropriate, more specific demographic information could be collected next year from participants. These community roles are shown in the graphic below.



In addition to overall participation, we looked at consistency of participation. The largest single group of participants, 41%, attended one session only; 21% attended two sessions and 12% attended all of the dialogues.



Concerns About Participation

Moderators, and other key participants, have expressed concern about both the depth and the breadth of participation. In May interviews and an earlier (February) group meeting, moderators expressed concern that too few people participated in the dialogues and that participation was not consistent. Here are some of the moderators' comments about participation.

- **We should have a bigger number.** "There's only a few at every location ... when I say a few ... when you have ten or fifteen. But, when you talk about a community that is not a big number. I mean to have ten to fifteen people present doesn't properly represent, in my opinion, the community. We should have a bigger number. We should have thirty to forty people at every one of these sites, in every one of the meetings. And, that is a concern of mine."
- **Few educators.** "We didn't have any teachers. There was no administration or teachers in any of these dialogues...teachers could have had great insight. They would offer a perspective that's really needed. And if the teachers had a better knowledge of what's going on, then they could share that with other parents when they come in contact with

parents and families. Well did you know Project Ujima has a group that's working on that very thing? I just feel like they should be part of the loop. I don't think they really understand what it is."

- **We need more.** "Because the larger community has to be involved. Persons have to understand that now that the work is down, in each group, to ten people, or, so ... that's not big enough. We need those thirty that we started out with."

No Systemic Issues in Participation

Given these ongoing concerns about participation, we elected to conduct focus groups to explore any participation issues that could be addressed by the program. In a focus group with persons who signed up but did not attend any of the dialogue sessions, and another with persons who attended just one session, we asked a series of questions about why persons either didn't participate or didn't return. We also queried respondents about the ways in which they heard about Project Ujima. In general, people reported learning about the project through largely informal channels. Family members, contact with community leaders, a conversation at a beauty shop were among the referral sources named.

People have not participated in Project Ujima for various reasons, largely work, family responsibilities and scheduling concerns. Nearly all of the persons we spoke with were involved in numerous other community activities. People did not believe the project provided any disincentives to participation and, in fact, one said the project was publicized very well. While participation, and continuous participation, has been flagged as a concern by informants, these data, albeit limited, don't suggest any systemic issues with the project's methods or messages. We did attempt to reach additional non-participants by phone, but calls from an external source during political primary season went unanswered and messages unreturned.

- **Family illness.** "I guess I really don't have an excuse, except for my husband who is sick. I attended the initial meeting, and, then I attended another at Schumacher. And, the next time I was called to come, I wasn't able to come because, like I said, my husband is sick."
- **Scheduling conflicts.** "And, mine was scheduling conflicts. They were Thursdays, and, I have a standard activity on Thursdays. I had one tonight, too, but, you put some things in place."
- **Work.** "It may be the time ... I'm working, and, then, when I get off of work ... I'm tired, and I get home, and I'm supposed to be coming here."
- **Work commitments.** "Mine was scheduling conflicts. The meetings were held on days that I was actually out of town. And, so, I couldn't make it."
- **Family responsibilities.** "I would say the times, only because of the kids that I still have at home. They're involved in a lot of things, so I'm driving them here, and, there. So,

time is usually my barrier... usually when they come home from school, I'm usually running around with the activities that they're involved in. So, sometimes ... like I had tried to come to something before, and, I wasn't able to because of being committed to taking them where they're going first."

- **Multiple commitments.** "As, I did tonight, I had to cancel something else. It seemed like every time there's a meeting scheduled, I was somewhere else."
- **No information or awareness issues.** "They do a fine job getting all the information out. Better than most anywhere I know."

Established Leaders Need to See Results

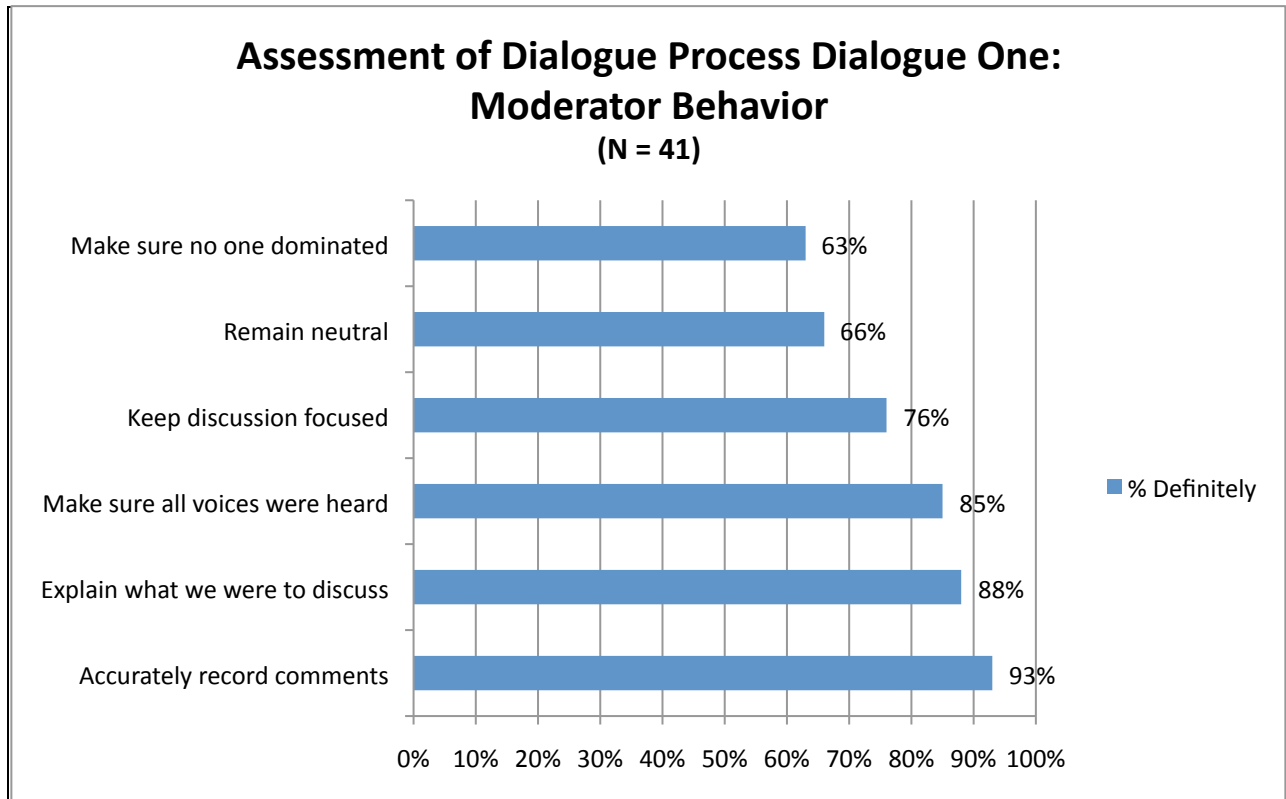
In a focus group with acknowledged community leaders who are not participating in Project Ujima we learned that there is some level of "burnout," as well as a healthy skepticism of "another project;" about dialogue without measurable results. Community leaders said they wanted to see results of the effort before they were willing to fully commit. This suggests that sustained involvement may be, in part, dependent on demonstrating a "quick success" and publicizing it well.

- **Discouraged.** "Well, during the last year I had a lot of different things going on. Personal things ... taking care of family members, and, not really feeling good, myself. But, one of the things, for me, I just have grown kind of weary, over nineteen years of talking about the same thing over, and, over again. And, I thought "well that is what this is what this is going to be." But, I know that conversations have to take place. But, quite honestly, I guess I was just discouraged. Very discouraged."
- **Tangible results.** "But, one of the things that somewhat I got tired of was a lot of lip service. I mean that ... we say that there's a lot of the same problems ... and, you know, hearing people say it's been the same thing for the last nineteen years. Well, there's a reason for it. There's a lot of lip service... when you look at what are the tangible results that have been achieved ... and, what I found was that I couldn't find any tangible results. And, as a result, I thought that I was wasting my time. I would I like ... one of the things that I would like to see for Project Ujima ... let's spend less time talking, and, let's spend more time doing, and, getting tangible results."

Assessment: Dialogue Process Worked

Participants in the dialogue completed short evaluation forms at the conclusion of each session. Data from Dialogue One are available and reported below.

In general these evaluations indicate that the moderators "Definitely" explained what the attendees were to discuss, accurately recorded comments, insured that all voices were heard and the discussion was focused. A majority of participants reported that the moderators were able to remain neutral in the discussions and were able to keep individuals from dominating the conversation.



Evaluation Findings: Overall Assessments

A Fundamentally New Process

Interviews, observations and data from the Judging Our Progress session conducted by staff suggest enthusiastic support for this process. It should be emphasized, however, that for many this is an entirely new way of engaging in public conversation and that it is difficult to understand and difficult to master. Here are several verbatim observations about the difficulty community members have in mastering this approach.

- Participants got lost.** “And, it was trying to get the group to go in consensus, in a direction that they could agree on, to go. And, that was sometimes difficult. They went all over the place. I do think that there needed to be more dialogue with the participants in terms of what the deliberative process meant ... what it was they were intended to do. Because they were, sometimes, just lost. They didn’t understand ... they got kind of lost.”
- Understanding of a fundamentally new process.** “I’m still saying that we all did not have a place to receive this process. I think that was big, itself. It was big for moderators ... it was also big for the participants.

Accomplishments Exceed Expectations

In general, moderators, key informants and participants all have been impressed, some say surprisingly so, with this process and with its early results.

- **Impressed beyond anything I could image.** “I am very impressed with it. Overall I think it’s great. We still have work to do getting people to understand what it is exactly. But I’m impressed. It’s beyond my sense of anything I could ever imagine would happen.”
- **A great accomplishment.** “I think that it has been remarkably a great accomplishment that we have gotten to the point that we are now. And the fact that we have four genuine groups that are poised to go out, and, to continue to do the work, I think is miraculous.”

Another word cloud below captures the language of the Project Ujima moderators about the accomplishments of the effort to date. Moderators are proud of the work they and the community have accomplished to date, and hopeful of the results they believe it will achieve.



High Quality of Moderators

The project was praised for the quality and the commitment of the moderator group. Several among them said that they felt honored to be a part of such a skillful group.

- **A brilliant group.** “I am impressed with the people who have come together. I think they are very talented ... experienced ... and, the most important thing, they have a heart for the community. And, it really is a brilliant group.”
- **The right people.** “It’s hard to describe the energy. I think they were just really successful in getting the right people to that group. I just think we could bottle up this group and go change the world

High Quality of Participation

Moderators, key informants and participants believe that this process has empowered residents to speak up and make their voices heard in establishing priorities for community use of the CLCs.

- **My voice did matter.** “They asked me to come and I spoke up. I know everyone didn’t agree with what I said.”
- **Everyone was allowed to talk.** “I think that this is what the community really had needed. Everyone was allowed to talk, and, voice, and, you don’t always get that. And, the whole community was invited. Whether they participated, or, not, that was their choice. And, that’s what I felt this whole exercise provided the community. An opportunity to say what they had on their minds, and, concerns that they had. And, maybe ... now we can’t guarantee, but maybe some of those concerns can be addressed at this time.”

Committed Participants

Moderators praised the commitment and the leadership potential of those who have been participating in the process.

- **Dedicated.** “I think the people that volunteered ... the community folks that came ... they were dedicated ... they were focusing ... they want to help. They want to see a change.”
- **Willing to share expertise.** “I’m really honored to be a part of this group. And, I’m really pleased that people’s individual commitment has been really articulated so beautifully in terms of hope for our children, and, just maintaining our neighborhoods. So, it’s just been very heartwarming to hear about the resources that we have, and, the peoples’ willingness to share them. And, their expertise.”
- **Concerned about community.** “I think, in general the groups are going pretty well. The people who are turning out to participate are people who want to participate. They are concerned about the community, and, they are expressing their thoughts and concerns. So, I think, in general, they’re doing what they’re supposed to do.”

- **Ready to get something done.** “But, in general, I’m pleased with the people. When my co-leader, my co-moderator ... we had a session and we talked about it. And, we even went through the list of people. So, I shared what I knew about the individuals, and, what they had to offer. And, I think we’ve got a great group because these people, they’re ready to get something done, and be specific.”

Early Results: Empowerment

Moderators and participants suggested that people feel empowered by the Project Ujima process because their voices were heard. Participants believe that the project has provided a structure and a useful framework for engagement.

- **Empowerment.** “It’s helping us to feel like “wow, we’re doing this. Somebody’s listening.” And, so, they’re listening to us, and, from that ... that basically gives you, or, helps you to feel like you’re empowered, because you see the Mission Statement. We can, actually, now see that “hey, they’re listening to us.” They came, and, they asked us for our opinion, and, they listened to us. So that, I think, gives you empowerment.”
- **People feel they have a part to play.** “People are allowed to respectfully express their concerns ... it does a lot for that individual. And, they pass that on, that, you know what, there is a group that if you have a concern you need to attend this meeting, etc. Whether they do, or, not ... now that’s questionable. But, at least it’s there, and, available to the community. And, they feel a part of that CLC. You know, it’s this beautiful facility that’s connected to the school, and, everyone should feel a part ... that they have a part to play as far as their community and the CLC.”
- **Empowers them to do the work.** “I do think that the process that Project Ujima used is a basic framework that is wonderful. I think it is ... and, it gets results. I feel that we are ready to go someplace. I really feel that we are truly, I guess as Obama says, neighborhood organizers. Because it’s there for the ordinary person. Not the politician, but just the guy on the street. It actually empowers those persons to do the work that they do, and, do the work for the general good. And, it gives them an organization to work out of. It gives them that organization to work out of. I think it’s wonderful. I think the whole process ... the way it was set up, has been wonderful. I never would have imagined, because I really didn’t know where we were going, even when we started. But, I never would have imagined that we would have gotten to this point.

Early Results: Emergent Leadership

At least two of the moderator group have been tapped to fill new leadership roles in the community; running a community festival and heading up the Buchtel PTA. Others have seen that persons who have not previously taken a leadership role are stepping forward.

- **Potential.** “In my group we have a lot of true community people ... the people down on the corner. Those persons who have always stayed in the community, and, watched the community, and, have wonderful ideas. Have the ideas, but they aren’t accustomed to putting ideas out there and leading. They may not have ever been leaders of much. And, I see some potential there. I see that leadership potential just waiting to get out because that’s what they want to do.”

Results Will Take Time

As enthusiastic as most are about the process, participants recognize that this is still a very new process and results will take time. They understand that there is an inherent tension between those who want to see results quickly, and this process of deliberation. Most believe that they have a “good start,” but measurable outcomes will take time.

- **A start.** “It’s just a start. We’re going somewhere and we’re in it. You just have to be on board if you want to go with us. It’s important that we not think only about the end in sight but the progress in sight and keep moving forward to a better Buchtel cluster.”
- **Not an easy task.** “I think we’re on the right track. Now, the training, and, the actual implementation of the concepts, I don’t think it’s an easy task.”
- **Takes Time.** “They’re going slower than I think a lot of us would like because we want results like yesterday. So, they’re going a little slower than I like, but, I think that’s part of this process too...Because it does take a little bit of time, you know. You may not see results in a three month time period ... six months ... nine months.”

A New Model

Moderators believe that Project Ujima’s model of democratic dialogue represents a fundamentally new way of doing business in West Akron. They assert that this can be a model for other groups and organizations in the community.

- **Process can go anywhere.** “I think we may have something. I believe so. I really believe so. I believe that this process can go anywhere. It can go into any community. I really do think that this is something that is good. And, hopefully, out of each of these centers, each of us is going to come up with a model that can go other places.”

Evaluation Findings – Issues

In this early stage of the project, the evaluation was deliberately focused on identifying issues or problems that could be addressed or rectified. Some of these have been raised in a short report (see Appendix), and others have been regularly raised in ongoing conference calls. The central issues in the project are: creating awareness and building sustained participation, showing results which will, in turn, build participation, and securing (as necessary) funding support for the implementation of the action priorities in each CLC.

Creating awareness and building participation

There is limited awareness of Project Ujima among non-participating community leaders and those who signed up, but did not participate. For many, the focus group, and the recruitment for the focus group, was the first time to learn about the project and its goals:

- **First time hearing.** “This is my first time hearing about it. Me, being, in the media, I should have heard about it, but, no one had contacted me until you did. So, this is my first time hearing.”
- **Creating awareness.** “It all goes back to creating awareness. If people are aware of resources that they have they can go to to improve their lives, then, maybe they’ll go. But, they don’t even know. The information is of value ... they don’t even know where to go to get it.”
- **Not sure what it was about.** “She was just talking about they were getting a group together ... a focus group. I wasn’t exactly sure about what ... but, I knew that it was about the education being taught in the school. Or, if it was, like I said, about the community, itself. For what to use the room for. Or the school for. I wasn’t exactly sure of what it was about, to tell you the truth. What the emphasis was on.”
- **Getting the community involved.** “I’m still not clear how we are going to get the community involved with everything going on in the community.”

Branding

It was suggested that Project Ujima needs a recognizable brand; something that communicates its importance and its place in the Buchtel community.

- **Something to show they’re making a difference.** “But, you asked the question, what would get people to come, and, I’m going to go back to my answer. If they could see something visible, and, that’s how people come. I’m saying that if we see some plants on some of the telephone poles down Copley Road, how did that get there? Ujima. If we see some posters, and, not just talking about PR, or, something ... not just a facade, but to point people that there’s something happening in our community. And, so that’s where you would get them to ... “what is Ujima”? “Well, the flower pots up there.” Or,

“that poster there ... that sign ... that billboard.” That’s Ujima. And, then it becomes a name that when Ujima calls I want to go because I see something that they’re making a difference.”

- **Ujima Ambassadors.** “But, when you talk about branding, Project Ujima should learn from, a local project. Look at the guys in the lime green shirts who are Ambassadors for the City of Akron downtown. You know that they are there to help. It’s the lime green shirt ... they’ll open your car, they’ll walk you for security. They’ve developed that brand that we are downtown to help people. You see them sweeping the streets, doing the weeding. Having that brand ... those fluorescent green shirts ... maybe they could get fluorescent orange, or something ... something that brands it with people who are the Ambassadors for Project Ujima. You associate something positive with it, and you want to become a part of it, because you know that these are people that are actually doing something, and, they’re not about lip service.”

Seeing Results

Most participants agree that the effort needs to achieve early results. Among non-participating community leaders, that view was expressed quite strongly. The focus group of community leaders, many of whom have been active in the Buchtel community for years, indicated that there is limited patience for talk divorced from action, and a healthy skepticism about “another” project. Leaders indicated that they would be willing to engage in the project, but only if they see that it is producing measurable results. Admittedly, this is challenging at an early point in a project that depends so heavily on process and deliberation. It has been suggested that producing a guide for community use of the CLCs, which is an issue in the community, would be a welcomed “early success.”

- **Have to know more.** “I have to know more about the program. I’m not saying I wouldn’t do it, but I need to know more about it. If I accept something I’m going to put my all into it. But, I need to know what I’m getting into before I could say yes. I want to see it being utilized. Something coming to fruition. And, that’s what is going to make me feel better about participating.”
- **Outcomes for the community.** “I did get a chance to look at some of the summary from Project Ujima, and, just looking at those issues have just always been a concern. And, I’m interested to see what the outcomes of the conversation will be for the community. Because, you know, we’ve been waiting a long time to see something that we could all put our hands around. And, we know that we need to do some things, and, there is an urgency. So, I’m hoping this process will take urgency, and, move things forward.”
- **People have to see success.** “I think people have to see successes, and, some positive outcomes of all of this verbiage that has been used. And, then that engages a person, you know. Because we can work on components of that mission statement for the next year, or, so, but if the public does not see an example of success, I don’t think you can engage as many people as you would like to have.”

Funding Support

A number of both participants and key leaders alike have expressed concern about the lack of funds immediately available for implementation of the projects, activities and services at the CLCs. This is a much discussed issue. For some, the lack of up-front financial support for the projects is an indication of a perceived lack of importance. Others believe this is a minor or a non-issue, particularly given a history of well-funded projects in the Buchtel cluster which have achieved minimal results. It is unclear, at this early point, what monetary resources, if any, will be necessary to implement programs, activities and services at the CLCs. Part of the task of the Action Research Teams is to research costs and potentially identify available resources, including funding. Funding is, however, a concern that is frequently voiced as the comments below indicate.

- **It would show good faith.** “When I realized that there were no funds ... we come up with all this great work and we spent all this great time to come up with ideas of projects that the community feels would help it ... to help it sell, and, not have any see money out of all of this to actually fund these projects was just a major letdown for me. Almost to the degree that I almost backed out. I mean I’ve shut down, literally, on the meetings, because I couldn’t understand how could we not think that part of the process through ... it doesn’t have to be a lot. It could be twenty thousand dollars, or, whatever, or, fifteen or something, so that it could fund four projects at five thousand dollars. At least get them started. It would show good faith that there’s real genuine interest in trying to do something to make the community look better by the people, themselves, who live in it.”
- **Need an endowment.** “We need a Foundation. What if \$150,000 was used to establish an endowment? It would help to keep people at the table. You can teach people how to fish, but you have to give them a pole. We need an endowment and need to teach the community how to use it.”
- **A little seed money.** “I don’t believe we have any monetary resource. That concerns me. That concerns me. We might not need it for our group ... another group might need it. I don’t know. We’ll do whatever we can to get the information and put it out there, but we can’t be having computer classes because we don’t have the resources. But, as I say, we can’t reinvent the wheel. We’ve got to find out where the urban leagues and the library, or whoever already has those resources ... we can send our people there to do it. It won’t necessarily, be at the Buchtel CLC, but we can provide information regarding other resources. But a little bit of seed money ... a little bit of seed money, you know, if you need it it’s there, and, if you don’t, then fine. And, I don’t even know what we would need it for. I don’t know. I just knew that I had none, so I worry about it.”

Evaluator's Observations

Project Ujima has the potential to significantly alter the ways in which educational (and other) decisions are made in the Buchtel community. The underlying belief structure holds that decision-making, particularly about education, should be shared as widely as possible. This new effort in deliberative democracy has been designed to do exactly that; engage all sectors of the community in creating plans to fulfill the promise of the Community Learning Centers. Those most closely involved in the process believe that it can serve as a model for meaningful community engagement.

The process is needed to address this community's issues of fragmentation, turfism and leadership. The community also has many assets, particularly in the new and elegant school buildings which offer the promise of becoming genuine hubs for ongoing education, service delivery, information sharing and for engaging the community. Project Ujima has been adroitly planned to address this community's challenges and build on its assets.

Project Ujima is very new. Many suggest that it is a fundamentally new way of community decision-making and so will take some time to be understood and be institutionalized. It requires significant efforts in creating community awareness, community education, sustained marketing and community mobilization. To date, the project has succeeded in mobilizing a cadre of highly skilled and passionate moderators, who have led the discussion process and will be leading the project both as decision-makers, and in the process of moving the CLC teams from talk to action. The project has also succeeded in mobilizing over 200 residents to develop a vision statement and to identify, deliberate and finally come to agreement on four action priorities that address community needs and are of importance to residents in the Buchtel cluster. While many are impatient for results, the planning process is well underway, and it is anticipated that the implementation of a service, program or activity that addresses those priorities will begin at each of the four CLCs during the fall.

Data indicate that the moderators were well chosen, highly competent and well prepared for their roles. The community visioning process went very well and resulted in what many believe is an important and "beautiful" community vision. The dialogues have also gone well, despite some issues in participation and sustaining participation. And currently nearly 100 citizens have engaged in an Research Action Team to do the concrete planning necessary to begin to implement service(s), program(s) and/or activity(ies) that align with the community's vision.

In addition to the specific accomplishments of the project, there are indications that the process has been empowering for participants, and there is evidence that participants have stepped up to exercise leadership in other aspects of school and community life.

The data gathered to date support a conclusion that the project has been capably led, well implemented, has produced important outputs and shows promise of leading to important new services in the Buchtel community. Some challenges remain, notably marketing and branding, sustaining participation, showing and documenting results and securing necessary funding support.

Appendix: Evaluation Plans, Measures and Preliminary Observations

ATTACHMENT “A” TO MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE AKRON NEIGHBORHOOD TRUST AND DIANE MOREHOUSE, QED

Evaluation Design

It should be noted that my practice is to directly engage partners and stakeholders in the ongoing processes of evaluation design and analysis. This utilization-focused approach is always important, in my view, but seems essential for this work in deliberative democracy and citizen engagement. As a result the sections below outline an approach to evaluation in broad terms, and suggest potential data gathering methods. Those potential methods are also incorporated into the budget. However, the methods may, and very likely will, change in response to input, and so are not exhaustively described.

Stakeholder Engagement and Collaborative Design. The first step needed in this project is to clearly and explicitly identify all those who can benefit or learn from this project and its evaluation – the evaluation stakeholders. They will include staff, partners, community residents, school decision-makers, elected officials, perhaps funders, and others. It is highly likely that there will be multiple levels of stakeholders, with varying levels of interest and engagement in this effort, and so, multiple ways to engage them in our process. Engaging stakeholders in a meaningful way in the design and conduct of an evaluation is the best way to insure that the evaluation is valid, valued, and able to inform and enhance the Community Learning Center engagement process.

Step one in this process is to brainstorm (by phone) to develop a list of potential stakeholders. Step two is to identify the various ways in which these stakeholders can and should be involved. Step three is to convene a Design Meeting, and step four, potentially, to contact other stakeholders by phone or in-person or in community – whatever is most valid and efficient. The design meeting will be conducted on-site in Akron, and the trip should also include visits, interviews and other methods by which I can become more directly familiar with the scope and proposed outcomes of this process.

The output will be a shared agreement on evaluation focus, including questions, alternative questions, issues, problems and goals. (Any other stakeholder contacts will be for the same purpose). The second purpose, once the focus of the evaluation is clear and agreed upon, will be to consider data gathering and measurement options. I will present various suggestions, including time and cost consideration, for measurement options. Proposed options are also included in this proposal. The overall output of the design meeting process will be a draft evaluation plan.

I recommend that this team of people be convened at a number of points throughout the evaluation to review new methods, to review and comment on emerging findings, to suggest changes in both the process and the evaluation, and to serve as a sounding board for findings.

Process/Implementation Evaluation. Understanding the processes of training, mobilization, engagement in deliberative dialogue and action planning that result from the Buchtel Cluster dialogues will be an important element of the evaluation in years one and two. We will collect information on participation, on retention, on outputs – numbers of people trained as moderators, numbers of students and others trained as facilitators, participation in dialogue and planning, action plans produced, etc.

In addition, the process evaluation should incorporate methods that will explore three essential components of this effort: *Understanding* of the goals, needs, and aims of this effort on the parts of multiple stakeholders and participants; *Support* for the process, direct engagement in it and the extent to which people believe that they have been empowered by it; and finally, *Influence* of the process on programs that are designed and implemented in the six clusters, as well as the apparent influence of the key citizens and actors taking a lead role in the process. It should be noted that the *Influence* of the process is both an outcome and a process issue.

Part of this process approach will have a formative component, that is, a look at issues or complicating factors which merit change or adjustment in the program. There will be regular and frequent reports so any of those issues can be dealt with readily or as they arise.

Process Evaluation (Years One and Two) Suggested Methods:

With appropriate clarity from the stakeholder group about questions and outcomes, and their concurrence on methods choices, I recommend the following process evaluation methods:

1. Regular observations of site-specific activities
2. Document (i.e. plans) reviews
3. Written (or electronic) surveys as appropriate
4. Ongoing telephone (and in person as economically feasible) interviews with a recurring sample of participants (i.e. multiple or repeated interviews over time), AND
5. (potentially) The use of PhotoVoice, a qualitative method for capturing data on programs and projects that utilizes photographs made and explained by program participants. This would be an excellent role for students and/or for the Citizen Journalists who are being convened to report on the process. I have not used Photo Voice, but have recently become aware of its value and power in empowering citizens and in capturing people's attitudes and opinions in a non-threatening, easily accessible fashion. (<http://www.photovoice.org/whatwedo/info/methodology>)

Focus of Process Evaluation – Indicators. In this phase of the evaluation, ongoing over at least the first two years, the process evaluation would assess the following indicators in each of the six clusters:

1. Numbers of people recruited and trained (moderators and facilitators)
2. Percent of trained participants retained
3. Reasons for non-retention (drop outs)
4. Types of citizens involved (representativeness of communities)

5. Numbers of citizens involved in community dialogues
6. Types of sustained engagement
7. Number and type of action plans produced (in each of the six CLCs)
8. Perceived value of discussions and processes
9. Perceived level of shared decision-making
10. Governing structures and shared governance
11. External resources obtained
12. Perceived community leadership changes

Outcome Evaluation. The focus of the outcome evaluation (years two and three) should be on the observable results or outcomes of this comprehensive process of citizen engagement – on individuals (knowledge, attitude, empowerment), on the Community Learning Centers (programs, services available, partnerships, leveraged resources, perceptions of community benefit, level of usage etc.), and, on the larger community (perceived power and efficacy, citizen engagement in issues, emergent community leadership). That larger question of community change could involve such issues as the participation of previously disenfranchised groups on community and civic processes, greater participation in school and school district issues, etc. The outcome evaluation should also try to address questions of the sustainability of these efforts, and their applicability or replicability in other locations.

In addition, with an eye toward the eventual replication of this model in other parts of the Akron community or outside, at least one report should focus directly on the essential components or elements of this model – things that worked well, things that worked less well, things that may be altered to suit other community needs. Data for that report will be generated by ongoing observations, work with staff and key CLC decision-makers.

Outcome Evaluation (Years Two and Three) Suggested Methods:

Several methods, and multiple methods, should be implemented here, pending the concurrence of the community stakeholders, staff and other partners.

1. Repeats (or enhancements) of community surveys done during the planning phases of the grant for the purposes of comparing community needs from the beginning to the end of the grant;
2. Interviews with key participants and community leaders, including school leaders, elected officials, media leaders and unofficial community leaders;
3. Document reviews (grants, leveraged resources, CLC usage data, etc.),
4. Collected stories and documentary accounts from citizen journalists (perhaps also employing PhotoVoice),
5. Focus groups, interviews and/or surveys with/of CLC users;
6. Focus groups or interviews with CLC governing boards/committees.

Focus of the Outcome Evaluation – Indicators. In the final phase of the evaluation, largely over the last two years of the grant, the outcomes evaluation would be designed to address the following outcomes.

1. Higher rates of citizen participation in school communities
2. Reduced issues of safety or community problems
3. Quality of decision-making and decision-making processes
4. Greater perceived self and community efficacy in problem solving
5. Sustained high levels of CLC use and satisfaction
6. Higher rates of engagement in other community issues and forums
7. New elected and unofficial leadership
8. Increased partnerships and financial resources in the CLCs and communities
9. Leadership patterns in communities
10. Use of deliberative dialogue for other issues in communities

Reporting

Frequent reports, both oral and short written, will be produced, allowing the stakeholder group and staff to identify issues and make changes as needed, to insure that the stakeholder group understands, agrees with the basic reliability and validity of findings, and that all of the partners can utilize the findings. I will propose to staff and the stakeholder committee that we submit at least one short quarterly report, maybe in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, and a longer and more comprehensive annual report that can be shared with funders. Each of the shorter reports will be shared as widely as possible with key stakeholders. We will need to decide if each of the six CLCs should receive one or more separate annual reports of accomplishments, issues and outcomes. That is more complicated, but might prove more useful to the individual clusters.

As previously noted, at least one output of the evaluation process should be a report on the specific elements of the model that could be shared with other funders or other groups contemplating replication of this process.

Project Ujima
Akron Neighborhood Trust
Early Observations and Suggestions for Evaluation

Diane L. Morehouse
February 28, 2012

Evaluations can go awry for various reasons. One important reason is that evaluators sometimes neglect to pay adequate attention to the local context of a project. Often that means that they don't fully recognize changes in the focus or direction of a project or don't adjust methods based on the project's real world implementation plans. My original plan for Project Ujima was to immediately convene a local stakeholder group to design an evaluation plan. After consultation, we collectively decided that an initial site visit was needed to enhance my understanding of the neighborhood, the participants and the process. In retrospect, that was a wise decision. The visit to the Buchtel cluster provided an essential chance to understand more of the issues in the community, to meet some of the key stakeholders and to learn their expectations for and impressions of the effort, and to learn something about the issues involved in its implementation. As a result of that visit, and better understanding of context, I am suggesting changes in approach for this first year of Project Ujima. Both my impressions of Project Ujima, and a revised evaluation approach, are shared in this document.

Observations About the Project

Enormous expectations

Each of my initial conversations with key stakeholders, including the Knight Foundation, Akron Public Schools, Project Ujima moderators and key partners, and city officials, clearly indicate the expectations for this project are very high.

The Knight Foundation's program officer described it as "...the cornerstone of what we consider community engagement." She went on to note that it will "engage new voices, increase the diversity of those voices, and build leadership in the community." The Foundation views the project as a potential model for others clusters in Akron and their other communities in the nation.

The District Superintendent indicated that this is a priority for the school district to: "hear about the things that people want in the communities. We want to make sure the community is heard. We want to listen to their voices." He went on to note that this process can and should result in important outcomes, aligned to the goals of Summit County 2010 (see attached), including poverty reduction among youth, reduced unemployment, enhanced wellness. These outcomes will be achieved, he believes, through this process which will link the Community Learning Centers and the community to a wide array of professional services including workforce development services such as job search and job training.

City council member Russ Neal observed that the Community Learning Centers and this project are “bigger than the original idea.” He believes they can and must be:

“A matrix for engagement. They are vibrant hubs of engagement from a holistic standpoint...a way to get the community inside the schools, for the community to communicate its value system. It is a way to connects the school center to the community – connects the community to the city.”

Like the Akron Schools Superintendent, Councilman Neal expects that Universities, hospitals and a range of social services providers will be engaged in providing programs and services in the Community Learning Centers.

Project Ujima community moderators and staff also have high expectations for the project, suggesting, among other aspirations, that the project can lead to, “shared governance in our community. This is a way to look at shared governance and give voice to those who are marginalized in our community.” Several of the moderators spoke about the excitement that people feel about this process and the opportunity to be heard.

In addition to direct comments, it was noted that the “movers and shakers” in the community have publicly acknowledged the importance of Project Ujima and regularly speak about it publicly.

These expectations make clear how important it is for Project Ujima to “get it right.”

Significant Need

It is universally acknowledged that the needs in the Buchtel community are significant. There is a very high rate of transfer out of the public schools, particularly Buchtel High School, to charter and parochial schools. As one person said, the residents “vote with their feet.” Most also believe that trust between residents and the school district is poor. One person noted that even in the construction of the CLC’s that the community voice was not heard, and that “trust had been breached.” There are widespread perceptions of inequitable distribution of school resources.

Despite an array of programs and a wealth of resources, most say that “nothing has worked” in the Buchtel cluster. The funding recommendation to the Knight Foundation described the community and its sense of self this way:

“There is a lack of trust among neighbors and leaders. Short-term solutions to bring the community together have been tried; outsiders have come in, prescribed fixes and left. Community engagement meetings with self-appointed leaders end in blame and finger pointing. Because of this mistrust and the lack of cohesiveness, the community has not been able to create a plan that would enable residents to effectively access

needed services such as computer training, job training, financial literacy training and child care that could help revitalize the community.”

It was clear from the third in the three-part discussion series at Buchtel High School on February 16 that there is a very high level of anger about a range of conditions in the community, including academic opportunities and academic performance of their children. Channeling the anger and the sense of oppression is important, in my view, and poses a significant challenge to the democratic dialogue.

Opportunities

In addition to the challenges of high expectations and high needs, and barriers to democratic dialogue, Project Ujima also has evident strengths and important opportunities.

Strong Leadership. Both of the leaders are highly focused on this process, committed to its success and so to listening to the ideas and experiences of their partners, facilitators and supporters. Both clearly understand the processes of democratic dialogue and both the challenges and the benefits of this kind of intense citizen engagement. It was suggested by the Knight Foundation that the vision and leadership of the principals was one of the reasons for their support.

In addition, observation confirms that each is a skillful and experienced facilitator, and the process, thus far, clearly looks to be extremely well-organized and well implemented.

Strong Partners. I was impressed with the knowledge base, passion, commitment and skill of the partners in the process, including the group of Project Ujima moderators. They have accepted a challenging and time-consuming task and appear committed to it and to its success. They are an important resource to a very small staff.

Community Readiness. Most observers suggested that the community is ready for something to “finally work.” Several noted that the community wants to come together, and that this is the right vehicle to make that happen. One of the moderators observed that people have been excited about the meetings, and it was clear that, even in a somewhat contentious dialogue at Buchtel, people were highly engaged in the process. The Knight Foundation funding recommendation, and a number of moderator comments, both suggested that there is a newly energized group of younger African American men who are committed to improving the community. People believe that the community is ready for a process like this, and as several said, “If it works in Buchtel it can work anywhere.”

Strength of Community Vision. A number of people that I spoke with talked about the level of involvement in and strength of the community vision crafted in the initial community meeting. As one informant put it, “The whole vision statement – it was a beautiful thing.” That the process appears to have lost some of that initial energy is in no way a criticism of the strength of the vision or of the process out of which it came.

Implementation Issues

There are, clearly, some issues in this very early stage of the project's implementation. In a context as challenging as West Akron and in a project with stakes so high, these issues are, in my experience, not at all surprising. My understanding of the issues and the questions they raise are below.

1. **Mobilization:** my work in democratic dialogue and civic engagement efforts suggests that community mobilization is the most essential element. Given a lack of time, and perhaps of resources, community mobilization appears to be an issue here. Documents from the planning phase indicate that APS personnel were targeted for engagement, as were city leaders. They also suggest that asset mapping was done in the community. Beyond that it is not clear what kind of deliberate mobilizing strategy was used. Very specific targeting of community organizations, faith based organizations, gathering places like beauty shops all could be potentially useful in mobilizing a "hard to mobilize" community.

Question: would a broadly representative local steering committee charged with advice on mobilizing the community be of assistance? Would additional asset mapping of community resources help? Is more systematic mobilization of potential participants and allies warranted?

2. **Participation:** Participation in the dialogues to date does not appear to be either broadly representative of interests and sectors of the community or deep in terms of numbers. Participation data indicate that there has been a general decline in participation in the initial three dialogues. All have indicated some concern about participation. Some have indicated concern about participation of non African-Americans. Others have indicated concern about the lack of participation of community service providers (i.e. workforce development, health). One suggested a need to "expand the age and gender range" of participants.

Question: Has the ideal "mix" of and number of participants been identified? What are reasonable targets for participation? What kind of "critical mass" is needed to engage the entire community? What are the reasons for participation and non-participation? Are there barriers to engagement?

3. **Goal Orientation:** In general, the project is about community use of school facilities during non-school hours. However, it was my observation during the February 16 Buchtel High School dialogue that the conversations in both circles were largely about curriculum issues. While many of the discussion items on the lists from the previous dialogues in both circles were about such things as health and nutrition programs, many were about curricular issues such as college readiness and specific classroom topics. It did not appear that there was equal understanding of the goal of making use of the CLCs for broad community benefit, and so the evening's task, among participants.

Question: Is there shared understanding of the goals and intended outcomes of Project Ujima? Is there shared understanding of programs and services available to both adults and students in the Buchtel cluster?

4. **Moderator Preparation:** The work of group moderators is very difficult, and as skilled as the moderators are, there may be some issues in modeling, in framing discussion and questions, even in recording discussion. Training has been extensive, but there may need to be ongoing opportunities for moderators to observe sessions, or even to practice skills.

Question: Do moderators believe they have the skills and experiences necessary to lead the groups successfully? How confident do they feel? What additional training is warranted?

5. **Action Team Resources:** It is not clear at this point how the teams will make the shift from dialogue to action, or if they have adequate resources of time, administrative support and funds to enable them to move successfully to action. Moving successfully to action is, clearly, an essential element in the long-term success of the deliberative process and it will be necessary for the teams to achieve a small success in program or services implementation if they are willing to continue and if others are willing to get engaged.

Question: Do the action teams have adequate resources to move to implementation? Are staff, building/cluster or action team coordinator positions needed? How can they be supported? Could a small amount of funding support be allocated to the action teams to support implementation? Is fund-raising for that purpose feasible? What alternatives exist to support implementation?

6. **Staff Resources:** This is a very large and ambitious project for two persons, however dedicated and skilled, without administrative or other support. The need to focus on administrative details, however important, would seem to divert attention away from the policy issues or more substantive elements of the program.

Question: Could the Knight Foundation budget be adjusted to provide for additional staff support for the project co-leaders?

7. **Race:** Issues of race, racism, historical and current oppression were evident and the discussion around them heated in the February 16 dialogue. While race is not the focus of the project, these issues which are so central to some, may serve as a major distraction.

Question: Would study circles discussions of race assist this process and bring community together or would such conversations be a distraction?

Observations About Evaluation

*“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”
Zora Neale Hurston (Dust Tracks on a Road)*

Our initial work plan called confidently for the convening of an evaluation advisory/steering group to work with me in identifying evaluation issues, questions and appropriate methods. The same group would regularly meet to review findings and offer suggestions. While one of the foci of the group would have been process evaluation, this kind of stakeholder driven evaluation often comes to focus on outcomes. That is premature in my view. There are, as noted above, a variety of issues that are affecting the early implementation of Project Ujima.

I continue to believe that while the stakeholder driven evaluation is ultimately the direction to take, it is too early in the project’s life and vitally important to learn what’s working and what’s not. The site visit leads me to advise that a well implemented formative evaluation needs to be done first, hopefully with the assistance of one or two of the moderators or other partners. Formative evaluation is evaluation done with the sole purpose of identifying issues, gaps and areas of needed improvement, collaboratively exploring solutions and, in general, readying a program for more in-depth assessment of process and outcomes. It is, as the quote suggests, “poking and prying with a purpose.”

A formative evaluation of issues and problems, with ongoing reporting, discussion and identification of solutions, could be fully implemented between now and the end of the first full year of funding (June). We could then begin the second year with our evaluation group collectively developing a longer-term evaluation plan and methods, including student work on storytelling and PhotoVoice.

Next suggested steps:

Conference call to discuss recommendations and develop plans
Identify a local partner to work with us – Skype call for 1) issues identification and 2) brainstorming methods. Methods should include:

- Regular phone/Skype meetings
- Ongoing documentation of process
- Process for community asset mapping or sector/partner identification
- Phone interviews with Ujima moderators to focus on preparation, comfort and other issues
- Electronic surveys (as and if appropriate)
- Phone interviews with key stakeholders
- Phone interviews with persons attending Visioning session who have not returned (local partner)

Site visit and Focus groups with participants (co-facilitated)
Site visit and Focus groups with non-participants (co-facilitated)

Proposed Workplan – Formative Evaluation Project Ujima

April 9, 2012

1. Phone interviews with a sample of Ujima moderators (draft questions attached)
2. Mixed method Focus Groups (draft survey and questioning routes attached)
 - Participants who later dropped out
 - Non participants
 - Community leaders declining to participate
3. Community asset mapping (?) [Will decide together if this would help in recruitment]
4. Analysis of participation data
5. Analysis of Judging Our Progress data
6. Others??
7. Report
8. Process for planning year two evaluation (committee and youth)

**Phone Interview
with
Sample of Ujima Moderators**

1. Think back to the moderator training...How well prepared were you for the actual dialogue process?
2. In what parts of the discussion process did you feel particularly strong?
3. In what parts of the discussion process did you feel less prepared?
4. Thinking back, how would you change the training? What would you add? Subtract?
5. How about continuing support from Project Ujima – are you getting what you need? What else could they do? In what ways could they help you with your important role?
6. In general, how do you feel that the discussion sessions have gone?
7. What surprised you about the discussions? Were you prepared to handle it?
8. What is the best aspect of the process so far?
9. What is the worst/least effective aspect of the process so far?
10. What, if any, are your concerns about the Research and Action Teams? What could be done to address your concerns?
11. What needs to change?

Focus Group Questioning Route

Kick Off and/or Discussion Group Participants Who Dropped Out

1. How did you first hear about these discussion groups – now called Project Ujima - in the Buchtel cluster?
2. Why did you decide to be attend and be part of one or more of the sessions?
3. What did you understand the whole purpose of the discussions to be? What was supposed to be accomplished?
4. How did the discussion groups go? Did you feel like your ideas and the ideas of others were listened to? Valued?
5. Were your expectations of the group met? Not met? Why or why not?
6. What is the main reason you didn't come back?
7. What could the organizers do to make it easier for you to participate?
8. How do you usually hear about or know about things that are going on in the Buchtel community?
9. What's the best way for project organizers to keep people informed about these discussion groups/Project Ujima.
10. Have you seen a report or had conversations with anyone about what's happening in the groups? What's your understanding of what's been accomplished so far?
11. In what ways will these discussions help (or not help) people in the Buchtel community feel empowered? Why? Why not?
12. In what ways will these discussions help (or not help) make the Community Learning Centers an important source of information, resources or help in the community?

Focus Group Questioning Route Non-Participants

1. How do you usually hear about or know about things that are going on in the Buchtel community – like community discussions or events?
2. What things make it easy for you or encourage you to come out to a community meeting or discussion?
3. What are the things that make it hard for you to come out to a community meeting or discussion?
4. Project Ujima is a new effort that is getting residents and stakeholders of the Buchtel cluster together to plan for programs and services at the new Community Learning Centers - Buchtel/Perkins, Crouse, Helen Arnold, Portage Path and Schumacher. How much, if anything at all, do you know about the project? Do you remember how or from whom you heard about it?
5. Are you at all interested in learning more about this project? What is the best way for the organizers of Project Ujima to get information to you and your family?
6. Project Ujima has identified one activity at each CLC– like career education or an African-centered book group – that a team of residents – an action team -will get going. What could the organizers of Project Ujima do – or offer - to get you involved in these community teams?
7. The new Community Learning Centers are supposed to offer programs and services at night and on weekends to benefit the whole community. What kinds of things would you like to see offered at the CLC's?
8. What kinds of issues would you like to see people in the community get together to discuss?

Focus Group Questioning Route Community Leaders (Non-Participating)

1. Project Ujima is a new effort that is getting residents and stakeholders of the Buchtel cluster together to plan for programs and services at the new Community Learning Centers - Buchtel/Perkins, Crouse, Helen Arnold, and Schumacher. How much, if anything at all, do you know about the project?
2. Have you seen a report or had conversations with anyone about what's happening in the groups? What's your understanding of what's been accomplished so far?
3. How do you usually hear about or know about things that are going on in the Buchtel community?
4. You have been described as a long-time leader in the Buchtel community. Involved in many past efforts to engage people and benefit the community. You haven't gotten engaged in this effort. Can you tell us why?
5. Are there issues or barriers that make it difficult for you to be a part of this effort? How might the project address or remove those issues or barriers?
6. Given your experience and perspective, what seems to be the best aspect/potentially most effective aspect of this project? How might it benefit the Buchtel community?
7. What is the worst or least effective aspect of this project? How could the organizers fix or address those problems?
8. What's the best way for project organizers to get and people involved in this project?
9. What lessons have you learned over the years about engaging people and building community leadership?
10. Are you at all interested in being a part of this project going forward? Why or why not?