

Principles of Effective Partnerships

Effective partnerships between public schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) require willingness and commitment. Both sides of the partnership have to be willing to make it work. While you cannot plan for every eventuality along the way, there are some basic steps you can take to make the partnership run smoothly:

Plan together from the start. Often partnerships get started because one party writes a grant proposal, or gets a support letter from one or more collaborators, and the partners don't really begin working together until "the check is in the mail." A much more effective approach is to get the leadership of the partner organizations together at the outset in order to conduct joint planning, visioning and problem solving. Make sure you draw on needs assessment data from both sides of the partnership--for example, use school data (such as grades, test scores, attendance and suspension figures) as well as community data (such as information about the number and location of children who are unsupervised after school) as you conduct your joint planning.

Clarify the Vision. The only reason to work in a partnership is to accomplish goals you can't accomplish separately. The most effective partnerships develop and own a shared sense of purpose. Most partnerships have found it useful to create a written vision statement that guides all of their subsequent work. Such a vision statement can outline specific goals but should also communicate the partnership's overarching purpose, philosophy and long-term aspirations.

Take Time to Get to Know One Another. In the press of daily business, partners might be tempted to ignore this step, thinking of it as a luxury. Experience reveals that taking the time to get to know one another is a cost-effective step that can prevent later misunderstandings. Think of this step as an investment. The CBOs leaders and staff should spend time on-site in the school, during the regular school day; and school leaders and staff should visit the CBO during its busy times. This way both sides of the partnership can learn about one another's core competencies and on-the-ground challenges.

Set Ground Rules. Jointly develop ground rules for who will lead meetings, how decisions will be made, how problems will be addressed, how grievances will be handled, etc. You won't be able to anticipate every challenge, but clear guidelines and procedures can help your partnership avoid unnecessary pitfalls – and having these discussions early can help the partners learn about one another's working styles.

Start Small and Build Gradually. You don't have to initiate a full-scale partnership in the first year. You might consider starting with a small after-school program in the first year, then adding components and participants the second year, then identifying some school-day activities that the school needs and the CBO is competent to provide (for example, supervising the playground program during recess and lunch breaks, or running after-school sports leagues). It's important to identify some "quick wins" that will allow the partnership to get off to a strong start. Quick wins are usually those that address critical needs and that build on the core competencies of the provider.

Involve Parents as Partners. The sooner you involve parents from the community, the easier it will be to spread the word of your new program and mobilize community support. With their unique perspectives on the strengths and needs of their community, parents and other residents will have a great deal of valuable information to share, especially when the key elements of the partnership are still on the drawing board.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities. Effective partnerships rely on clear communication and a shared understanding of who will be responsible for what. Given that there are usually multiple players involved on both sides of the partnership, it's best to get written agreements and protocols that outline the basic elements of the partnership. These written documents should be jointly developed by the partners.

Share Decision-Making. Throughout the implementation of the partnership, from design and planning to daily operation, those people who will be depended upon to make the program work should be consulted and given ample opportunities to provide input and feedback. Shared decision-making and strong leadership are not contradictory. At various times, depending on the issue, one partner can and should become the group's natural leader.

Prepare Team Members to Work Together. Another cost of doing business in a partnership mode is training. Make sure you arrange for joint orientation and training opportunities for school and CBO staff to enable all the partners to develop the skills they will need to make their collaboration work. Small, interactive workshops should focus on developing team building, shared decision-making, communication and conflict resolution skills.

Stay Flexible. Effective school-community partnerships require willingness for all involved to be flexible. Do not expect everything to go exactly as planned, and do not expect to be able to continue working just as you always have. Also, remember that the context on both sides of the partnership keeps changing. Schools will get new mandates, CBOs will gain and lose funding streams, and schools and CBOs will experience board and staff leadership changes. All of these inevitable occurrences will affect – but not derail – your partnership, if you are prepared and can stay flexible.

Keep Tending the Relationship. Team building is not a one-time event. It needs continued examination and daily effort. And this is true at all levels of the partnership—from the superintendent (Chief Professional Officer) relationship to the on-site interactions between teachers and youth workers.

Be Strategic. In meetings with school partners, listen carefully to what's on their minds, and think about ways you can respond to their needs. With new standards and increased accountability, schools are under increasing pressure. But with these pressures have come new opportunities. Constantly assess what your CBO is bringing to the partnership (including program, staffing and financial resources) – and be proactive in offering to make these resources available to your schools and school district.