Schools, Families, and Community Working Together:
Building an Effective Collaborative
online at: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/buildingeffectivecollab.pdf

Everyone seems to agree that by working together, schools, homes, and communities are better positioned to minimize problems and maximize results. This has led to establishment of a growing number of collaborative bodies. Unfortunately, many efforts to connect and collaborate have floundered because too little attention has been paid to building an effective operational infrastructure for working together.

Collaboration involves more than coming together for a monthly meeting to share information and do a bit of coordination. Rather, the aim is to find ways to weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to accomplish major results.

Growing appreciation of human and social capital has resulted in collaboratives expanding to include a wide spectrum of community stakeholders. Included are service agencies, businesses, community-based organizations, post-secondary institutions, religious and civic groups, programs at parks and libraries, and any other facilities that can be used for recreation, learning and literacy, youth development and enrichment, vocational education, and economic development. The political realities of local control have further expanded collaborative bodies to encompass local policymakers, representatives of families, nonprofessionals, volunteers, and, indeed, all who are willing to contribute their talents and resources.

Some Key Elements of Effective School-Community Collaboratives

Obviously, true collaboration involves more than meeting and talking. Building an effective collaborative operational infrastructure requires ensuring the capacity of participants to do the job (e.g., providing training, time, support, and authority to carry out their roles and functions). It is when such matters are ignored that groups find themselves meeting and meeting, but going nowhere.

While it is relatively simple to make informal links, establishing major long-term collaborations is complicated. Doing so requires vision, cohesive policy, and systemic changes to develop formal and institutionalized sharing of a wide range of responsibilities and resources.

The hallmark of a school-community collaborative is a formal agreement among participants to establish an autonomous structure to accomplish goals that would be difficult to achieve by any of the participants alone. While participants may have a primary affiliation elsewhere, they commit to working together under specified conditions to pursue a shared vision and common set of goals. In this context, collaboration becomes both a desired process and an outcome for schools, and communities.

A collaborative structure requires shared governance (power, authority, decision-making, accountability) and a set of resources woven together for pursuing the shared vision and goals. It also requires well-defined working relationships to connect and mobilize resources, such as financial and social capital, and to use these resources in planned and mutually beneficial ways.

Operationally, a collaborative is defined by its *functions*. These may include enhancing how existing resources are used, generating new resources, improving communication, coordination, planning, networking, and mutual support, building a sense of community, and much more. Such functions encompass a host of specific tasks such as mapping and analyzing resources; exploring ways to share facilities, equipment, and other resources; expanding opportunities for community service, internships, jobs, recreation, and enrichment; developing pools of nonprofessional volunteers and professional pro bono assistance; making recommendations about priorities for use of resources; raising funds and pursuing grants; advocating for appropriate decision-making; and much more. Organizationally, a collaborative must develop an infrastructure (e.g., steering, work groups, and

daily staffing) that enables accomplishment of its functions and related tasks. Because the functions pursued by a collaborative almost always overlap with work being carried out by others, a collaborative needs to establish connections with other bodies.

From a policy perspective, efforts must be made to guide and support the building of collaborative bridges connecting school, family, and community. For schools not to marginalize such efforts, the initiative must be fully integrated with school improvement plans. There must be policy and authentic agreements. Although formulation of policy and related agreements takes considerable time and other resources, their importance cannot be overemphasized. Failure to establish and successfully maintain effective collaboratives probably is attributable in great measure to proceeding without the type of clear, high-level, and long-term policy support that ends the marginalization of initiatives to connect families, communities, and schools.

Given that all involved parties are committed to building an effective collaborative, the key to doing so is an appreciation that the process involves significant systemic changes. Such an appreciation encompasses both a vision for change and an understanding of how to effect and institutionalize the type of systemic changes needed to build an effective collaborative infrastructure. The process requires changes related to governance, leadership, planning and implementation, and accountability. For example:

- Existing governance must be modified over time. The aim is shared decision-making involving school and community agency staff members, families, students, and other community representatives. Governance of a collaborative must be designed to equalize power so that decision-making appropriately reflects all stakeholder groups and so that all are equally accountable.
- High-level leadership assignments must be designated to facilitate essential system changes and build and maintain connections. The leadership must include representatives from all groups, and all participants must share in the workload – pursuing clear roles and functions.
- Mechanisms must be established and institutionalized for analyzing, planning, coordinating, integrating, monitoring, evaluating, and strengthening collaborative efforts.

A collaborative needs financial support. Evidence of appropriate policy support is seen in the adequacy of funding for *capacity building* to (1) accomplish desired systemic changes and (2) ensure the collaborative operates effectively over time. The core operational budget can be direct funding and in-kind contributions such as providing space for the collaborative. A school or community entity or both might be asked to contribute the necessary space. As specific functions and initiatives are undertaken that reflect overlapping areas of concern for schools and community agencies such as safe schools and neighborhoods, some portion of their respective funding streams can be braided together. Finally, there will be opportunities to supplement the budget with extramural grants. It is important, however, not to pursue funding for projects that will distract the collaborative from vigorously pursuing its vision in a cohesive (nonfragmented) manner.

As suggested above, collaboratives differ in terms of purposes and functions. They also differ in terms of a range of other dimensions: their degree of formality, time commitment, breadth of connections, or the amount of system change required to carry out their functions and achieve their purposes. Because family, community, and school collaboration can differ in so many ways, it is helpful to think in terms of categories of key factors relevant to such arrangements (see Table on the following page).

Table 1: Some Key Dimensions Relevant to School-Community Collaborative Arrangements

I. Initiation
  A. School-led
  B. Community-driven

II. Nature of Collaboration
  A. Formal
    • Memorandum of understanding
    • Contract
    • Organizational/operational mechanisms
  B. Informal
    • Verbal agreements
    • Ad hoc arrangements

III. Focus
  A. Improvement of program and service
    provision
    • For enhancing case management
    • For enhancing use of resources
  B. Major systemic changes
    • To enhance coordination
    • For organizational restructuring
    • For transforming system structure/function

IV. Scope of Collaboration
  A. Number of programs and services involved
    (from just a few up to a comprehensive,
    multifaceted continuum)
  B. Horizontal collaboration
    • Within a school, agency, or other entity
    • Among schools, agency, or other entity
  C. Vertical collaboration
    • Within a catchment area (e.g., school and
      community agency, family of schools, two
      or more agencies or other entities)
    • Among different levels of jurisdictions
      (e.g., community/city/county/state/federal)

V. Scope of Potential Impact
  A. Narrow-band – a small proportion of youth
    and families can access what they need
  B. Broad-band – all in need can access what
    they need

**VI. Ownership and Governance of Programs
  and Services**
  A. Owned and governed by a school
  B. Owned and governed by the community
  C. Shared ownership and governance
  D. Public-private venture – shared ownership
    and governance

VII. Location of Programs and Services
  A. Community-based, school-linked
  B. School-based

**VIII. Degree of Cohesiveness among
  Multiple Interventions Serving the
  Same Student/Family**
  A. Unconnected
  B. Communicating
  C. Cooperating
  D. Coordinated
  E. Integrated

IX. Level of System Intervention Focus
  A. Systems for promoting healthy
    development
  B. Systems for prevention of problems
  C. Systems for early-after-onset of
    problems
  D. Systems of care for treatment of severe,
    pervasive, and/or chronic problems
  E. Full continuum, including all levels

X. Arenas for Collaborative Activity
  A. Health (physical and mental)
  B. Education
  C. Social services
  D. Work, career
  E. Enrichment, recreation
  F. Juvenile justice
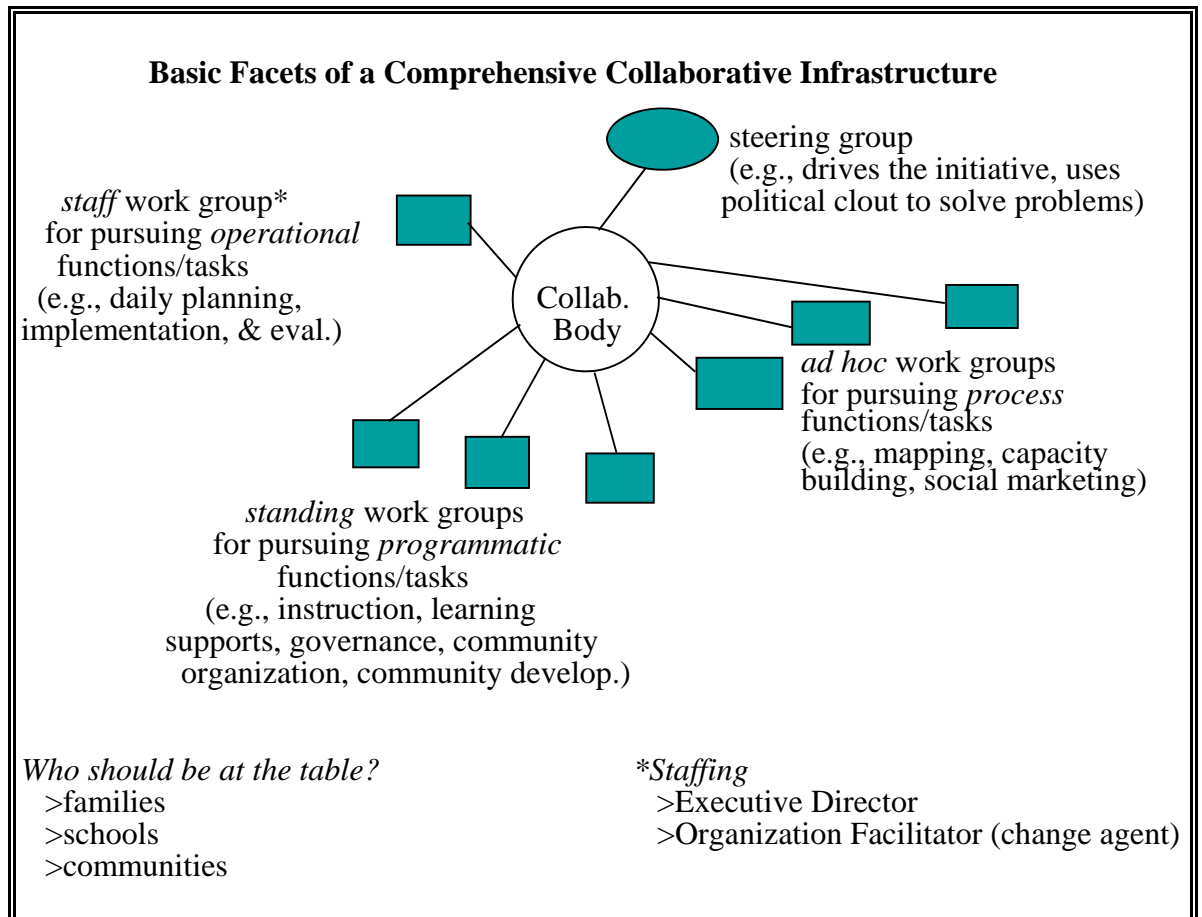 G. Neighborhood/community improvement

XI. Types of Participants
  A. County agencies and bodies
  B. Municipal agencies and bodies
  C. Physical and mental health and
    psychosocial concerns facilities and
    groups
  D. Mutual support/self-help groups
  E. Child care/preschool centers
  F. Postsecondary education institutions
    and their students
  G. Service agencies
  H. Service clubs and philanthropic
    organizations
  I. Youth agencies and groups
  J. Sports/health/fitness/outdoor groups
  K. Community-based organizations
  L. Faith community institutions
  M. Legal assistance groups & practitioners
  N. Ethnic associations
  O. Special interest associations and clubs
  P. Artists and cultural institutions
  Q. Businesses, corporations, unions
  R. Media
  S. Family members, local residents, senior
    citizens groups

Building and Maintaining an Effective Infrastructure

In developing an effective collaborative, an infrastructure of organizational and operational mechanisms at all relevant levels are required for oversight, leadership, capacity building, and ongoing support. A well-designed infrastructure provides ways to (1) make decisions about priorities and resource allocation; (2) maximize systematic planning, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation; (3) enhance and redeploy existing resources and pursue new ones; (4) outreach to create formal working relationships with all concerned stakeholders, and (5) regularly nurture, upgrade, and renew the collaborative. With each of these functions in mind, specific mechanisms and their interrelationship with each other and with other planning groups can be developed.

An effective school-community collaborative must coalesce at the local level. Thus, a school and its surrounding community are a reasonable point around which to build an infrastructure that interconnects at all levels. That is, first the focus is on mechanisms at the school-neighborhood level. Based on analyses of what is needed to facilitate and enhance efforts at a locality, mechanisms are conceived that enable several school-neighborhood collaboratives to work together for increased efficiency, effectiveness, and economies of scale. Then, system-wide (e.g., district, city, county) mechanisms can be (re)designed to provide support for what each locality is trying to develop. Such an infrastructure of well-conceived and interconnected mechanisms must be appropriately sanctioned and endorsed by governing bodies. Key facets of the infrastructure at all levels are a high-powered steering group, designated operational leaders and staff, and ad hoc and standing work groups (e.g., resource- and program-oriented teams). The figure below graphically illustrates the basic facets of such an infrastructure.

Basic Facets of a Comprehensive Collaborative Infrastructure

steering group
(e.g., drives the initiative, uses political clout to solve problems)

staff work group*
for pursuing *operational*
functions/tasks
(e.g., daily planning,
implementation, & eval.)

Collab.
Body

ad hoc work groups
for pursuing *process*
functions/tasks
(e.g., mapping, capacity
building, social marketing)

standing work groups
for pursuing *programmatic*
functions/tasks
(e.g., instruction, learning
supports, governance, community
organization, community develop.)

Who should be at the table?
  >families
  >schools
  >communities

*Staffing
  >Executive Director
  >Organization Facilitator (change agent)

A Few Lessons Learned

Keep in mind the following lessons we learned the hard way. First, given how difficult it is to work effectively in a collaborative and with its workgroups, strategic capacity building is essential. This includes providing the training, time, support, and authority to carry out roles and functions. It also requires effective meeting facilitation.

A second lesson relates to how agreements are made. In marketing new ideas, it is tempting to accentuate their promising attributes and minimize complications. For instance, in negotiating agreements to connect, decision makers frequently are asked simply to sign a memorandum of understanding, rather than involving potential collaborators in processes that lead to a comprehensive, informed commitment. Relatedly, collaboratives should not rely on positive personal relationships. Personal connections are vulnerable to the mobility that characterizes many groups. The aim is to establish stable and sustainable *working relationships*. Effective working relationships requires clear roles, responsibilities, and an institutionalized infrastructure, including well-designed mechanisms for performing tasks, solving problems, and mediating conflict. There also must be sufficient resources and time so participants can learn and carry out new functions effectively. And, when newcomers join, well-designed procedures must be in place to bring them up to speed.

Third, without careful planning, implementation, and capacity building, collaborative efforts rarely live up to the initial hope. For example, formal arrangements for working together often take the form of meetings. To be effective, such sessions require thoughtful and skillful facilitation. Even when they begin with great enthusiasm, poorly facilitated working sessions quickly degenerate into another meeting, more talk but little action, another burden, and a waste of time. This is particularly likely to happen when the primary emphasis is on the unfocused mandate to "collaborate," rather than on moving an important vision and mission forward through effective working relationships and well-defined functions and tasks.

Finally, Collaboration is a developing process. Collaboratives must be continuously nurtured, facilitated, and supported, and special attention must be given to overcoming institutional and personal barriers. A fundamental institutional barrier to school-community collaboration is the degree to which efforts to establish such connections are *marginalized* in policy and practice. The extent to which this is the case is seen when existing policy, accountability, leadership, budget, space, time schedules, and capacity-building agendas do not support efforts to use collaborative arrangements effectively and efficiently to accomplish desired results. This may simply be a matter of benign neglect. More often, it stems from a lack of understanding, commitment, and/or capability related to establishing and maintaining a potent infrastructure for working together and sharing resources. Occasionally, lack of support takes the ugly form of forces at work trying to actively undermine collaboration. Examples of institutional barriers include:

- Policies that mandate collaboration but do not enable the process (e.g., a failure to reconcile differences among participants with respect to the outcomes for which they are accountable; inadequate provision for braiding funds across agencies and categorical programs)
- Policies for collaboration that do not provide adequate resources and time for leadership and stakeholder training and for overcoming barriers to collaboration
- Leadership that does not establish an effective infrastructure, especially mechanisms for steering and accomplishing work/tasks on a regular, ongoing basis
- Differences in the conditions and incentives associated with participation such as the fact that meetings usually are set during the work day which means community agency and school personnel are paid participants, while family members are expected to volunteer their time.

At the personal level, barriers mostly stem from practical deterrents, negative attitudes, and deficiencies of knowledge and skill. These vary for different stakeholders but often include problems related to work schedules, transportation, child care, communication skills, understanding of differences in organizational culture, accommodations for language and cultural differences, and so forth.

Concluding Comments

Remember: *It's not about having a collaborative . . . it's about collaborating to be effective. It involves more than meeting and talking . . . it's about working together in ways that produce effective interventions and this often requires creatively overcoming barriers.*

At the same time, we recognize the myriad political and bureaucratic difficulties involved in making major institutional changes. This leads to the caution that the type of approach described here is not a straightforward sequential process. Rather, the work of establishing effective collaboratives emerges in overlapping and spiraling ways.

The success of collaborations in enhancing school, family, and community connections is first and foremost in the hands of policymakers. If increased connections are to be more than another desired but underachieved aim of reformers, policymakers must understand the nature and scope of what is involved. They must deal with the problems of marginalization and fragmentation. They must support development of appropriately comprehensive and multifaceted school-community collaboratives. They must revise policy related to school-linked services because such initiatives are a grossly inadequate response to the many complex factors that interfere with development, learning, and teaching, especially the lack of safety at school.

A Few References

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See also the Center's clearinghouse Quick Find on School and Community Collaboration – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201_01.htm

Appendix

Facilitating Effective Working Relationships in Collaboratives

In facilitating effective working relationships, collaborative leaders should

- encourage all participants to defer negative judgments about those with whom they will be working

- enhance expectations that working together will be productive, with particular emphasis on establishing the value-added by each participant in pursuing mutually desired outcomes

- ensure there is appropriate time for making connections

- establish an infrastructure that provides support and guidance for effective task accomplishment

- provide active, task-oriented meeting facilitation that minimizes ego-oriented behavior

- ensure regular celebration of positive outcomes resulting from working together

On a personal level, it is worth teaching participants that building relationships and effective communication involve the willingness and ability to

- convey empathy and warmth – as a way of communicating understanding and appreciation of what others are thinking and feeling and transmitting a sense of liking

- convey genuine regard and respect – as a way of transmitting real interest and enabling others to maintain a feeling of integrity and personal control

- talk with, not at, others – as a way of conveying that one is a good listener who avoids prejudgment, doesn't pry, and shares experiences only when appropriate and needed

For more information, see the website at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/