School and Community Collaboration to Promote a Safe Learning Environment

by Howard S. Adelman and Linda Taylor

Concern about safety at schools cries out for enhancing connections with families and other neighborhood resources. For youngsters, the concern is not just about the specific school incidents that capture media attention. Rather, children and adolescents suffer from a wide range of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse experienced at school, at home, and in the neighborhood. While the data on how many are debilitated by such experiences are incomplete and likely to underestimate the extent of the problem, no one denies that far too many youngsters are affected by ordeals ranging from excessive teasing, bullying, and intimidation to mayhem and major criminal acts.

Needed: Comprehensive Intervention Approaches and School-Community Collaboration

Clearly, the problem of unsafe schools is widespread and linked with other problems that are significant barriers to development, learning, parenting, teaching, and socialization. As a consequence, single-factor solutions do not work. Complex, inter-related problems call for comprehensive solutions. Comprehensive, interrelated solutions call for collaboration. The need is for a full continuum of interventions—ranging from primary prevention through early interventions to treatment of individuals with severe, pervasive, and chronic problems. School and community policymakers must quickly move to embrace comprehensive, multifaceted schoolwide and community-wide approaches. And, they must do so in a way that fully integrates such approaches with school improvement planning at every school site.

By working together, schools, homes, and communities are better positioned to minimize problems and maximize results. Schools can be more effective and caring places when they are an integral and positive part of the community. This plays out as enhanced academic performance, fewer discipline problems, higher staff morale, and improved use of resources. Reciprocally, families and other community entities can enhance parenting and socialization, address psychosocial problems, and strengthen the fabric of family and community life by working in collaboration with schools.

Collaboration involves more than simply working together. It is more than a process to enhance cooperation and coordination. By coming together in the context of a school-community *collaborative,* stakeholders can weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to enhance safe and caring schools and communities that support all youth and their families and enable success at school and beyond.

Collaboratives often are established because of the desire to address a specific problem or in the wake of a crisis. In the long-run, however, school-community collaboratives must be driven by an enlightened and comprehensive vision about strengthening youngsters, families, schools, and neighborhoods. This encompasses a focus on safe schools and neighborhoods; positive development and learning; personal, family, and economic well-being; and more.

Building an effective collaborative requires stakeholder readiness, creative leadership, and new and multifaceted roles for professionals who work in schools and communities, as well as for those family and other community members willing to assume leadership. An optimal approach involves formally blending together resources of at least one school and sometimes a group of schools or an entire school district with local family and community resources. That is, true collaboratives attempt to weave together the responsibilities and resources of many participating stakeholders to create a unified entity. Indeed, 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, postsecondary 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. The point is to work together in ways that produce the type of actions that lead to important results. For this to happen, steps must be taken to ensure that collaboratives are formed in ways that ensure they can be effective. This includes providing them with the 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; and advocating for appropriate decision-making.

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 1).

Barriers to Building Effective School-Community Collaboratives

Years ago, former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders noted: "We all say we want to collaborate, but what we really mean is that we want to continue doing things as we have always done them while others change to fit what we are doing." More recently, some advocates for collaboration have cautioned that some collaboratives amount to little more than groups of people sitting around engaging in "collabo-babble."

When collaboratives are not well conceived and carefully developed, they generate barriers to their own success. In too many instances, so-called collaborations have amounted to little more than co-location of community agency staff on school campuses. Services continue to function in relative isolation from each other, focusing on discrete problems and specialized services for individuals and small groups. Too little thought has been given to the importance of meshing

Table 1. *Some Key Dimensions Relevant to School-Community Collaboratives*

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 jurisdiction (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. Post-secondary 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

(as opposed to simply linking) community services and programs with existing school-owned and operated activity. The result is that a small number of youngsters are provided services that they might not otherwise have received, but little connection is made with families and school staff and programs. Because of this, a new form of fragmentation is emerging as community and school professionals engage in a form of "parallel play" at school sites. Moreover, when "outside" professionals are brought into schools, district personnel may view the move as discounting their skills and threatening their jobs. On the other side, the "outsiders" often feel unappreciated. Conflicts arise over "turf," use of space, confidentiality, and liability. School professionals tend not to understand the culture of community agencies; agency staff are rather naive about the culture of schools.

In bringing schools and community agencies to the same table, it is a given that problems will arise related to the differences in organizational mission, functions, cultures, bureaucracies, and accountability. Considerable effort will be required to teach all participants about these matters. When families are at the table, power differentials are common, especially when low-income families are involved and are confronted with credentialed and titled professionals. Working collaboratively requires overcoming these barriers. This is easier to do when all stakeholders are committed to moving beyond naming problems to a careful analysis of why a problem has arisen and then moving on to creative problem solving.

Collaboratives are about building potent, synergistic, *working relationships*, not simply establishing positive personal connections. Collaboratives built mainly on personal connections are vulnerable to the mobility that characterizes many such groups. The point is to establish stable and sustainable working relationships. This requires clear roles, responsibilities, and an institutionalized infrastructure, including well-designed mechanisms for performing tasks, solving problems, and mediating conflict.

Collaboration is a developing process. Collaboratives must

Facilitating Effective Working Relationships in School-Community 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 effectively accomplishing tasks;

- Provide active, task-oriented meeting facilitation that minimizes ego-oriented behavior; and

- 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; and

- 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.

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; and

- 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.

Other barriers arise because of inadequate attention to factors associated with systemic change. How well an innovation such as a collaborative is implemented depends to a significant degree on the personnel doing the implementing and the motivation and capabilities of participants. There 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.

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.*

Building and Maintaining an Effective School-Community Infrastructure at School, District, and State Levels

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 evalua-

tion; (3) enhance and redeploy existing resources and pursue new ones; (4) reach out 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, the initial 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). Figure 1 illustrates the basic facets of such an infrastructure.

A Few Lessons Learned

The following are lessons we learned the hard way and should be kept in mind by those who establish collaboratives. First, as
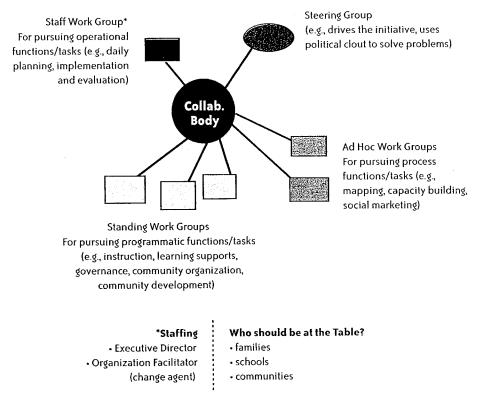

Staff Work Group*
For pursuing operational functions/tasks (e.g., daily planning, implementation and evaluation)

Steering Group
(e.g., drives the initiative, uses political clout to solve problems)

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 development)

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

Who should be at the Table?
• families
• schools
• communities

Figure 1. *Basic Facets of a Comprehensive Collaborative Infrastructure*

stressed above, a collaborative needs ongoing financial support. A caution here is to avoid pernicious funding. That is, it is important not to pursue funding that detours the collaborative's mission. This includes the trend to try to expand resources through over-emphasizing services that can be reimbursed through third-party payments, such as Medicaid funds. This often results in limiting what can be done.

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 for school connections, decision makers frequently are asked simply to sign a memorandum of understanding, rather than involving them in processes that lead to a comprehensive, informed commitment. Sometimes their motivation mainly is to obtain extra resources; sometimes they are motivated by a desire to be seen by constituents as doing *something* to improve things. In both instances, the result may be premature implementation that produces the form rather than the substance of change.

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, given how hard it is to work effectively in a group, steps must be taken to ensure that work groups are formed in ways that maximize their effectiveness. This includes providing them with the training, time, support, and authority to carry out their role and functions. It also requires effective meeting facilitation.

Conclusion

Schools are more safe, effective, and caring places when they are an integral part of the community. This means less violence, fewer discipline problems, enhanced academic performance, higher staff morale, and improved use of resources. For communities, collaboration with schools can strengthen the fabric of family and community life.

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 poli-cymakers. 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.

Focusing primarily on linking community services to schools downplays the role of existing school and other community and family resources. This perpetuates an orientation that overemphasizes individually prescribed services, results in further fragmentation of interventions, and undervalues the human and social capital indigenous to every neighborhood. And all this is incompatible with developing the type of comprehensive approaches needed to make statements such as *We want all children to succeed* and *No Child Left Behind* be more than rhetoric. ■

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Resources

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Additional resources available from the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA through its website at www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu.