

Excerpt From
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School-Community Partnerships: A Guide



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Why School-Community Partnerships?

To enhance effectiveness

Increasingly, it is becoming evident that schools and communities should work closely with each other to meet their mutual goals. With respect to addressing barriers to development and learning and promoting healthy development, schools are finding they can do their job better when they are an integral and positive part of the community. Indeed, for many schools to succeed with their educational mission, they must have the support of community resources such as family members, neighborhood leaders, business groups, religious institutions, public and private agencies, libraries, parks and recreation, community-based organizations, civic groups, local government. Reciprocally, many community agencies can do their job better by working closely with schools. On a broader scale, many communities need schools to play a key role in strengthening families and neighborhoods.

For schools and other public and private agencies to be seen as integral parts of the community, steps must be taken to create and maintain various forms of collaboration. Greater volunteerism on the part of parents and others from the community can break down barriers and help increase home and community involvement in schools. Agencies can make services more accessible by linking with schools and enhance effectiveness by integrating with school programs. Clearly, appropriate and effective collaboration and teaming are key facets of addressing barriers to development, learning, and family self-sufficiency.

To provide a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated continuum of interventions

While informal school-community linkages are relatively simple to acquire, establishing major long-term connections is complicated. They require vision, cohesive policy, and basic systemic reforms. The complications are readily seen in efforts to evolve a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated continuum of school-community interventions. Such a comprehensive continuum involves more than connecting with the community to enhance resources to support instruction, provide mentoring, and improve facilities. It involves more than establishing school-linked,

integrated health/human services and recreation and enrichment activities. It requires comprehensive strategies that are multifaceted. Such a continuum of interventions can only be achieved through school-community connections that are formalized and institutionalized, with major responsibilities shared. (For an example, see Appendix A.)

To support
all youth &
families.

Strong school-community connections are especially critical in impoverished communities where schools often are the largest piece of public real estate and also may be the single largest employer. As such they are indispensable to efforts designed to strengthen families and neighborhoods. Comprehensive school-community partnerships allow all stakeholders to broaden resources and strategies to enhance caring communities that support all youth and their families and enable success at school and beyond.

Comprehensive school-community partnerships represent a promising direction for efforts to generate essential interventions to address barriers to learning, enhance healthy development, and strengthen families and neighborhoods. Building such partnerships calls for an enlightened vision, creative leadership, and new and multifaceted roles for professionals who work in schools and communities, as well as for all who are willing to assume leadership.

Hawaii's Healthy Children Healthy Communities Model stresses the importance using school-community partnerships to develop a systemic, comprehensive, multifaceted approach. They note: "A systemic approach recognizes that no one program, no matter how well designed it is, will work for all participants." Their model, "which is comprehensive in nature, goes an important step beyond assuming that a process which has been developed is systemic simply because it has a comprehensive foundation. The interactions between essential environments (e.g., culture, community, school, family, peers) need to be in sync, understood, and explained in how they are coherently pushing in the same direction for desired wellness outcomes. A systemic approach is fluid, dynamic, interactive -- a cohesive process supporting outcome for a shared vision. Key components offer:

- * **comprehensive integration** of all the essential strategies, activities, and environments of school, community, family, students, and peers;
- * **prevention** rather than crisis orientation by offering young people support and opportunities for growth;
- * **collaborative partnerships** between policymakers, departmental managers, schools, community health and social agencies, businesses, media, church groups, university and colleges, police, court, and youth groups; and
- * **local decision-making** empowering communities to produce change for youth by recognizing and solving their own problems and practicing an assets-based approach in program development.

What are School-Community Partnerships?

Definitions

One recent resource defines a school-community partnership as:

An intentional effort to create and sustain relationships among a K-12 school or school district and a variety of both formal and informal organizations and institutions in the community (Melaville & Blank, 1998).

For purposes of this guide, the *school* side of the partnership can be expanded to include pre-k and post secondary institutions.

Defining the *community* facet is a bit more difficult. People often feel they belong to a variety of overlapping communities -- some of which reflect geographic boundaries and others that reflect group associations. For purposes of this guide, the concept of community can be expanded to encompass the entire range of *resources* (e.g., all stakeholders, agencies and organizations, facilities, and other resources -- youth, families, businesses, school sites, community based organizations, civic groups, religious groups, health and human service agencies, parks, libraries, and other possibilities for recreation and enrichment).

The term partnership also may be confusing in practice. Legally, it implies a formal, contractual relationship to pursue a common purpose, with each partner's decision-making roles and financial considerations clearly spelled out. For purposes of this guide, the term partnerships is used loosely to encompass various forms of temporary or permanent structured connections among schools and community resources. Distinctions will be made among those that connect for purposes of communication and cooperation, those that focus on coordinating activity, those concerned with integrating overlapping activity, and those attempting to weave their responsibilities and resources together by forming a unified entity. Distinctions will also be made about the degree of formality and the breadth of the relationships.

As should be evident, these definitions are purposefully broad to encourage "break-the-mold" thinking about possible school-community connections. Partnerships may be established to enhance programs by increasing availability and access and filling gaps. The partnership may involve use of school or neighborhood facilities and equipment; sharing other resources; collaborative fund raising and grant applications; shared underwriting of some activity; volunteer assistance; pro bono services, mentoring, and training from professionals and others with special expertise; information sharing and dissemination; networking; recognition and public relations; mutual support; shared responsibility for planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs and services; building and maintaining infrastructure; expanding opportunities for assistance; community service, internships, jobs, recreation, enrichment; enhancing safety; shared celebrations; building a sense of community.*

*School-community partnerships are often referred to as collaborations. There are an increasing number of meetings among various groups of collaborators. Sid Gardner has cautioned that, rather than working out true partnerships, there is a danger that people will just sit around engaging in "collabo-babble." Years ago, former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders cited the cheek-in-tongue definition of collaboration as "an unnatural act between non-consenting adults." She went on to say: "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."

Optimally, school-community partnerships formally blend together resources of at least one school and sometimes a group of schools or an entire school district with resources in a given neighborhood or the larger community.

The intent is to sustain such partnerships over time.

The range of entities in a community are not limited to agencies and organization; they encompass people, 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, enrichment, and support.

While it is relatively simple to make informal school-community linkages, establishing major long-term partnerships is complicated.

They require vision, cohesive policy, and basic systemic reforms. The complications are readily seen in efforts to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated continuum of school-community interventions. Such a continuum involves much more than linking a few services, recreation, and enrichment activities to schools.

Major processes are required to develop and evolve formal and institutionalized sharing of a wide spectrum of responsibilities and resources. School-community partnerships can weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to enhance caring communities that support all youth and their families and enable success at school and beyond. Strong school-community connections are critical in impoverished communities where schools often are the largest piece of public real estate and also may be the single largest employer.

Comprehensive partnerships represent a promising direction for efforts to generate essential interventions to address barriers to learning, enhance healthy development, and strengthen families and neighborhoods. Building such partnerships requires an enlightened vision, creative leadership, and new and multifaceted roles for professionals who work in schools and communities, as well as for all who are willing to assume leadership.

Dimensions and Characteristics

Because school-community partnerships differ from each other, it is important to be able to distinguish among them. An appreciation of key dimensions helps in this respect. Although there are many characteristics that differentiate school-community collaborations, those outlined in Table 1 will suffice to identify key similarities and differences.

Table 1

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 reform

to enhance coordination

for organizational restructuring

for transforming system structure and 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

among schools/agencies

C. Vertical collaboration

within a catchment area (e.g., school and community

agency, family of schools, two or more agencies)

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 & Governance of Programs and Services

A. Owned & governed by school

B. Owned & governed by community

C. Shared ownership & governance

D. Public-private venture -- shared ownership & 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

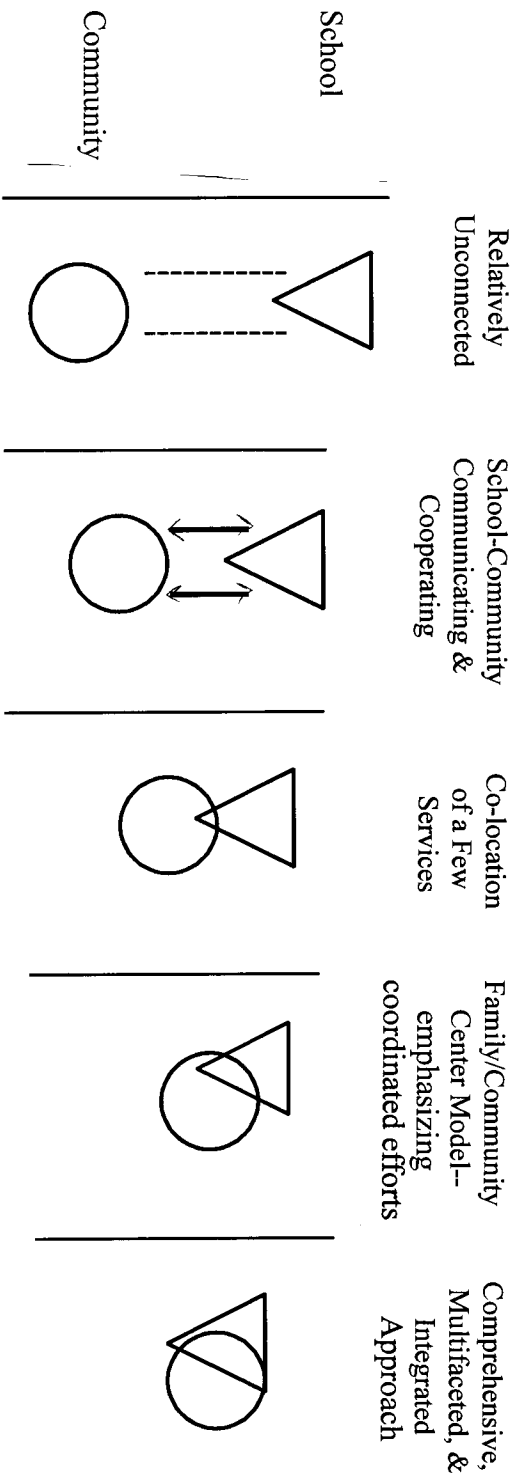
E. Integrated

Figure 1A. Framework outlining areas for school-community collaborations.

	Health (physical, mental)	Education (regular/special trad./alternative)	Social Services	Work/ Career	Enrichment/ Recreation	Juvenile Justice	Neighborhood/ Comm. Improvement
Prevention							
Early-After- Onset Intervention							
Treatment of Chronic & Severe Problems							

Level of Initiatives: National (federal/private), State-wide, Local, School/neighborhood

Figure 1B. Nature and scope of collaboration.



Principles

Those who create school-community partnerships subscribe to certain principles.

In synthesizing “key principles for effective frontline practice,” Kinney, Strand, Hagerup, and Bruner (1994) caution that care must be taken not to let important principles simply become *the rhetoric of reform, buzzwords that are subject to critique as too fuzzy to have real meaning or impact . . . a mantra . . . that risks being drowned in its own generality.*

Below and on the following page are some basic tenets and guidelines that are useful referents in thinking about school-community partnerships and the many interventions they encompass. With the above caution in mind, it is helpful to review the ensuing lists. They are offered simply to provide a sense of the philosophy guiding efforts to address barriers to development and learning, promote healthy development, and strengthen families and neighborhoods.

As guidelines, Kinney et al (1994) stress:

- *a focus on improving systems, as well as helping individuals*
- *a full continuum of interventions*
- *activity clustered into coherent areas*
- *comprehensiveness*
- *integrated/cohesive programs*
- *systematic planning, implementation, and evaluation*
- *operational flexibility and responsiveness*
- *cross disciplinary involvements*
- *deemphasis of categorical programs*
- *school-community collaborations*
- *high standards-expectations-status*
- *blending of theory and practice*

Interventions that are:

- *family-centered, holistic, and developmentally appropriate*
- *consumer-oriented, user friendly, and that ask consumers to contribute*
- *tailored to fit sites and individuals*

Interventions that:

- *are self-renewing*
- *embody social justice/equity*
- *account for diversity*
- *show respect and appreciation for all parties*
- *ensure partnerships in decision making/shared governance*
- *build on strengths*
- *have clarity of desired outcomes*
- *incorporate accountability*

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The following list reflects guidelines widely advocated by leaders for systemic reforms who want to evolve a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated continuum of interventions.

An infrastructure must be designed to ensure development of a continuum that

includes a focus on prevention (including promotion of wellness), early-age and early-after-onset interventions, and treatment for chronic problems,

is comprehensive (e.g., extensive and intensive enough to meet major needs)

is coordinated-integrated (e.g., ensures collaboration, shared responsibility, and case management to minimize negative aspects of bureaucratic and professional boundaries),

is made accessible to all (including those at greatest risk and hardest-to-reach),

is of the same high quality for all,

is user friendly, flexibly implemented, and responsive,

is guided by a commitment to social justice (equity) and to creating a sense of community,

uses the strengths and vital resources of all stakeholders to facilitate development of themselves, each other, the school, and the community,

is designed to improve systems and to help individuals, groups, and families and other caretakers,

deals with the child holistically and developmentally, as an individual and as part of a family, and with the family and other caretakers as part of a neighborhood and community (e.g., works with multigenerations and collaborates with family members, other caretakers, and the community),

is tailored to fit distinctive needs and resources and to account for diversity,

is tailored to use interventions that are no more intrusive than is necessary in meeting needs (e.g., least restrictive environment)

facilitates continuing intellectual, physical, emotional and social development, and the general well being of the young, their families, schools, communities, and society,

is staffed by stakeholders who have the time, training, skills and institutional and collegial support necessary to create an accepting environment and build relationships of mutual trust, respect, and equality,

is staffed by stakeholders who believe in what they are doing,

is planned, implemented, evaluated, and evolved by highly competent, energetic, committed and responsible stakeholders.

Furthermore, infrastructure procedures should be designed to

ensure there are incentives (including safeguards) and resources for reform,

link and weave together resources owned by schools and other public and private community entities,

interweave all efforts to (a) facilitate development and learning, (b) manage and govern resources, and (c) address barriers to learning,

encourage all stakeholders to advocate for, strengthen, and elevate the status of young people and their families, schools, and communities,

provide continuing education and cross-training for all stakeholders,

provide quality improvement and self-renewal,

demonstrate accountability (cost-effectiveness and efficiency) through quality improvement evaluations designed to lead naturally to performance-based evaluations.