

# Addressing Barriers

# to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link

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*One of the most important, cross-cutting social policy perspectives to emerge in recent years is an awareness that no single institution can create all the conditions that young people need to flourish....*

Melaville & Blank, 1998

## School-Community Partnerships from the School's Perspective

School-community initiatives are sprouting in a dramatic and ad hoc manner. They could improve schools, strengthen neighborhoods, and lead to a marked reduction in young people's problems. Or, such "collaborations" can end up being another reform effort that promised a lot, did little good, and even did some harm.

In thinking about school-community partnerships, it is essential not to overemphasize the topics of coordinating community services and collocation on school sites. Such thinking downplays the need to also restructure the various education support programs and services that schools own and operate. And, it has led some policy makers to the mistaken impression that community resources can effectively meet the needs of schools in addressing barriers to learning. In turn, this has led some legislators to view the linking of community services to schools as a way to free-up the dollars underwriting school-owned services. The reality is that even when one adds together community and school assets, the total set of services in impoverished locales is woefully inadequate. In situation after situation, it has become evident that

as soon as the first few sites demonstrating school-community collaboration are in place, community agencies find they have stretched their resources to the limit. Policy makers must realize that as important as it is to reform and restructure health and human services, accessible and high quality services remain only one facet of a comprehensive, cohesive approach for strengthening families and neighborhoods.

### What are School-Community Partnerships?

School-community partnerships often are referred to as collaborations. Sid Gardner has cautioned, however, that some so-called collaborations amount to little more than groups of people sitting around engaging in "collababble." Years ago, former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, with her tongue firmly planted in her cheek, recounted a 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.

(cont. on page 2)

### Contents

- *Need some help?* See page 3.
- Pages 3 & 4 highlight some *resources* you may want to know about.
- See page 9 for a self-study survey instrument related to school-community partnerships.
- Page 12 outlines community resources that can partner with schools.

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 inter-

ventions 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. Because school-community partnerships differ from each other, it is important to be able to distinguish among them (see the outline below).

### **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/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*

(cont. from page 2)

## A Growing Movement

Projects across the country demonstrate how schools and communities connect to improve results for youngsters, families, and neighborhoods. Various levels and forms of school-community collaboration are being tested, including state-wide initiatives in California, Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, and Oregon, among others. The aims are to improve coordination and eventually integrate many programs and enhance their linkages to school sites. To these ends, projects incorporate as many health, mental health, and social services as feasible into "centers" (including school-based health centers, family and parent centers) established at or near a school. They adopt terms such as school-linked and coordinated services, wrap-around, one-stop shopping, full service schools, systems of care, and community schools.<sup>1</sup> There are projects to (a) improve access to health services (such as immunizations, sub-stance abuse programs, asthma care, pregnancy prevention) and access to social service programs (such as foster care, family preservation, child care), (b) expand after school academic, recreation, and enrichment, such as tutoring, youth sports and clubs, art, music, museum programs, (c) build systems of care, such as case management and specialized assistance, (d) reduce delinquency (preventing truancy, conflict mediation, violence reduction), (e) enhance transitions to work/career/post-secondary education (mentoring, internships, career academies, job placement), and (f) enhance life in school and community, such as programs to adopt-a-school, use volunteer and peer supports, neighborhood coalitions.

Such "experiments" have been prompted by diverse initiatives:

- some are driven by school reform
- some are connected to efforts to reform community health and social service agencies
- some stem from the youth development movement
- a few arise from community development initiatives.

For example, initiatives for school-linked services often mesh with the emerging movement to enhance the infrastructure for youth development. This growing youth development movement encompasses concepts and practices aimed at promoting protective factors, asset-building, wellness, and empowerment. Included are (a) some full service school approaches, (b) efforts to establish "community schools," (c) programs to mobilize community and social capital, and (d) initiatives to build community policies and structures to enhance youth support, safety, recreation, work, service, and enrichment. This focus on community embraces a wide range of stakeholders, including families and community based and linked organizations such as public and private health and human service agencies, schools, businesses, youth and faith organizations, and so forth. In some cases, institutions for postsecondary learning also are involved, but the nature and scope of their participation varies greatly, as does the motivation for the involvement. Youth development initiatives expand intervention efforts beyond services and programs. They encourage a view of schools not only as community centers where families can easily access services, but also as hubs for community-wide learning and activity. Increased federal funding for after school programs at school sites enhances this view by expanding opportunities for recreation, enrichment, academic supports, and child care. Adult education and training at neighborhood school sites also help change the old view that schools close when the youngsters leave. Indeed, the concept of a "second shift" at school sites is beginning to spread in response to community needs.

Interest in school-community links is growing at an exponential rate. For schools, such partnerships are seen as one way to provide more support for schools, students, and families. For agencies, connection with schools is seen as providing better access to families and youth and thus as providing an opportunity to reach and have an impact on hard-to-reach clients. The interest in such collaborations is bolstered by the renewed concern about widespread fragmentation of school and community interventions. The hope is that by integrating available resources, a significant impact can be made on "at risk" factors.

No complete catalogue of school-community initiatives exists. Examples and analyses suggesting trends can be found in works referenced at the end of this article. A few conclusions from several resources are presented on the following pages.

<sup>1</sup>In practice, the terms *school-linked* and *school-based* encompass two separate dimensions: (a) where programs/services are *located* and (b) who *owns* them. Taken literally, school-based should indicate activity carried out on a campus, and school-linked should refer to off-campus activity with formal connections to a school site. In either case, services may be owned by schools or a community based organization or in some cases may be co-owned. As commonly used, the term school-linked refers to community owned on- and off-campus services and is strongly associated with the notion of coordinated services.

## School-Community Initiatives -- State of the Art

***Linking Services to Schools.*** Concern about the fragmented way *community* health and human services are planned and implemented has led to renewal of the 1960s human service integration movement. The hope of this movement is to better meet the needs of those served and use existing resources to serve greater numbers. To these ends, there is considerable interest in developing strong relationships between school sites and public and private community agencies. In analyzing *school-linked service initiatives*, Franklin and Streeter (1995) group them as -- informal, coordinated, partnerships, collaborations, and integrated services. These categories are seen as differing in terms of the degree of system change required. As would be anticipated, most initial efforts focus on developing informal relationships and beginning to coordinate services. A recent nation-wide survey of school board members reported by Hardiman, Curcio, & Fortune (1998) indicates widespread presence of school-linked programs and services in school districts. For purposes of the survey, school-linked services were defined as "the coordinated linking of school and community resources to support the needs of school-aged children and their families." The researchers conclude: "The range of services provided and the variety of approaches to school-linked services are broad, reflecting the diversity of needs and resources in each community." They are used to varying degrees to address various educational, psychological, health, and social concerns, including substance abuse, job training, teen pregnancy, juvenile probation, child and family welfare, and housing. For example, and not surprisingly, the majority of schools report using school-linked resources as part of their efforts to deal with substance abuse; far fewer report such involvement with respect to family welfare and housing. Most of this activity reflects collaboration with agencies at local and state levels. Respondents indicate that these collaborations operate under a variety of arrangements: "legislative mandates, state-level task forces and commissions, formal agreements with other state agencies, formal and informal agreements with local government agencies, in-kind (nonmonetary) support of local government and nongovernment agencies, formal and informal referral network, and the school administrator's prerogative." About half the respondents note that their districts have no policies governing school-linked services.

***Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods.*** Schorr (1997) approaches community-school initiatives from the perspective of strengthening families and neighborhoods and describes a variety of promising partnerships. Her analysis concludes that a synthesis is emerging that "rejects addressing poverty, welfare, employment, education, child development, housing, and crime one at a time. It endorses the idea that the multiple and interrelated problems . . . require multiple and interrelated solutions."

***Strengthening Schools and Communities.*** After surveying a variety of school-community initiatives, Melaville and Blank (1998) conclude that the number of school-community initiatives is skyrocketing; the diversity across initiatives in terms of design, management, and funding arrangements is dizzying and daunting. Their analysis suggests (1) the initiatives are moving toward blended and integrated purposes and activity and (2) the activities are predominantly school-based and the education sector plays "a significant role in the creation and, particularly, management of these initiatives" and there is a clear trend "toward much greater community involvement in all aspects" of such initiatives -- especially in decision making at both the community and site levels. They also stress that "the ability of school-community initiatives to strengthen school functioning develops incrementally," with the first impact seen in improved school climate. With respect to sustainability, their findings support the need for stable leadership and long-term financing. Finally, they note

*The still moving field of school-community initiatives is rich in its variations. But it is a variation born in state and local inventiveness, rather than reflective of irreconcilable differences or fundamental conflict. Even though communication among school-community initiatives is neither easy nor ongoing, the findings in this study suggest they are all moving toward an interlocking set of principles. An accent on development cuts across them all. These principles demonstrate the extent to which boundaries separating major approaches to school-community initiatives have blurred and been transformed. More importantly, they point to a strong sense of direction and shared purpose within the field.*

(cont. on page 7)

**Some Concerns.** Findings from the work of the Center for Mental Health in Schools (e.g., 1996;1997) are in considerable agreement with other reports. However, this work also stresses that the majority of school and community programs and services function in relative isolation of each other. Most school and community interventions continue to focus on discrete problems and specialized services for individuals and small groups. Moreover, because the primary emphasis is on restructuring community programs and co-locating some services on school sites, a new form of fragmentation is emerging as community and school professionals engage in a form of parallel play at school sites.

Ironically, while initiatives to integrate health and human services are meant to reduce fragmentation (with the intent of enhancing outcomes), in many cases fragmentation is compounded because these initiatives focus mostly on *linking* community services to schools.<sup>2</sup> It appears that too little thought has been given to the importance of *connecting* community programs with existing support programs operated by the school. As a result, when community agencies collocate personnel at schools, such personnel tend to operate in relative isolation of existing school programs and services. Little attention is paid to developing effective mechanisms for coordinating complementary activity or integrating parallel efforts. Consequently, a youngster identified as at risk for dropout, suicide, and substance abuse may be involved in three counseling programs operating independently of each other.

Relatedly, there is rising tension between school district service personnel and their counterparts in community based organizations. When "outside" professionals are brought in, school specialists often view it as discounting their skills and threatening their jobs. The "outsiders" often feel unappreciated and may be rather naive about the culture of schools. Conflicts arise over "turf," use of space, confidentiality, and liability.

The fragmentation is worsened by the failure of policymakers at all levels to recognize the need to reform and restructure the work of school and community professionals who are in positions to address barriers and facilitate development and learning. For example, the prevailing approach among school reformers is to concentrate almost exclusively on improving instruction and management of schools. This is not to say they are unaware of the many barriers to learning. They simply don't spend much time developing effective ways to deal with such matters. They mainly talk about "school-linked integrated services" -- apparently in the belief that a few health and social services will do the trick. The reality is that prevailing approaches to reform continue to marginalize all efforts designed to address barriers to development and learning. As a result, little is known about effective processes and mechanisms for building school-community connections to prevent and ameliorate youngsters' learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems. The situation is unlikely to improve as long as so little attention is paid to restructuring what schools and communities already do to deal with psychosocial and health problems and promote healthy development. And a key facet of all this is the need to develop models to guide development of productive school-community partnerships.

<sup>2</sup>As the notion of school-community collaboration spreads, the terms *services* and *programs* are used interchangeably and the adjective *comprehensive* often is appended. The tendency to refer to all interventions as services is a problem. Addressing a full range of factors affecting young people's development and learning requires going beyond *services* to utilize an extensive continuum of programmatic interventions. Services themselves should be differentiated to distinguish between narrow-band, personal/clinical services and broad-band, public health and social services. Furthermore, although services can be provided as part of a program, not all are. For example, counseling to ameliorate a mental health problem can be offered on an ad hoc basis or may be one element of a multifaceted program to facilitate healthy social and emotional development. Pervasive and severe psychosocial problems, such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, physical and sexual abuse, gang violence, and delinquency, require multifaceted, programmatic interventions. Besides providing services to correct existing problems, such interventions encompass primary prevention (e.g., public health programs that target groups seen as "at risk") and a broad range of open enrollment didactic, enrichment, and recreation programs. Differentiating services and programs and taking care in using the term *comprehensive* can help mediate against tendencies to limit the range of interventions and underscores the breadth of activity requiring coordination and integration.

## Recommendations to Enhance School-Community Partnerships

Effective school-community partnerships require a cohesive set of policies. Cohesive policy will only emerge if current policies are revisited to reduce redundancy and redeploy school and community resources that are used ineffectively. Policy must

- move existing *governance* toward shared decision making and appropriate degrees of local control and private sector involvement -- a key facet of this is guaranteeing roles and providing incentives, supports, and training for effective involvement of line staff, families, students, and other community members
- create *change teams and change agents* to carry out the daily activities of systemic change related to building essential support and redesigning processes to initiate, establish, and maintain changes over time
- delineate high level *leadership assignments* and underwrite essential *leadership/management training* re. vision for change, how to effect such changes, how to institutionalize the changes, and generate ongoing renewal
- establish institutionalized *mechanisms to manage and enhance resources* for school-community partnerships and related systems (focusing on analyzing, planning, coordinating, integrating, monitoring, evaluating, and strengthening ongoing efforts)
- provide adequate funds for *capacity building* related to both accomplishing desired system changes and enhancing intervention quality over time -- a key facet of this is a major investment in staff recruitment and development using well-designed, and technologically sophisticated strategies for dealing with the problems of frequent turnover and diffusing information updates; another facet is an investment in technical assistance at all levels and for all aspects and stages of the work
- use a sophisticated approach to *accountability* that initially emphasizes data that can help develop effective approaches for collaboration in providing interventions and a results-oriented focus on short-term benchmarks and that evolves into evaluation of long-range indicators of impact. (Here, too, technologically sophisticated and integrated management information systems are essential.)

Such a strengthened policy focus would allow personnel to build the continuum of interventions needed to make a significant impact in addressing the health, learning, and well being of all youngsters through strengthening youngsters, families, schools, and neighborhoods.

## Concluding Comments

A reasonable inference from available data is that school-community collaborations can be successful and cost effective over the long-run. They not only improve service access, they encourage schools to open their doors and enhance opportunities for recreation, enrichment, remediation and family involvement. However, initiatives for enhancing school-community collaboration have focused too heavily on integrated school-linked services. In too many instances, school-linked services result only in co-locating agency staff on school campuses. As these activities proceed, a small number of students receive services, but little connection is made with school staff and programs, and thus, the potential impact on academic performance is minimized.

School-community partnerships must not be limited to linking services. Such partnerships must focus on using all resources in better ways to evolve the type of comprehensive, integrated approaches essential for addressing the complex needs of all youngsters, families, schools, and neighborhoods in the most cost-effective manner. The need is for a high priority policy commitment that strategically (a) uses school-community partnerships to develop comprehensive approaches by weaving together school and community resources at all levels and (b) sustains partnerships and generates renewal. Development of such approaches requires cohesive policy that facilitates blending of many public and private resources. In communities, the need is for better ways of connecting agency and other resources to each other and to schools. In schools, there is a need for restructuring to combine parallel efforts supported by general funds, compensatory and special education entitlement, safe and drug free school grants, and specially funded projects. In the process, efficiency and effectiveness can be achieved by connecting families of schools, such as high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools.

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## Community Resources that Could Partner with Schools

### *County Agencies and Bodies*

(e.g., Depts. of Health, Mental Health, Children & Family Services, Public Social Services, Probation, Sheriff, Office of Education, Fire, planning councils, Recreation & Parks, Library, courts, housing)

### *Municipal Agencies and Bodies*

(e.g., parks & recreation, library, police, fire, courts, civic event units)

### *Physical and Mental Health & Psychosocial Concerns Facilities and Groups*

(e.g., hospitals, clinics, guidance centers, Planned Parenthood, Aid to Victims, "Friends of" groups; family crisis/support centers, help & hotlines, shelters, mediation and dispute resolution centers)

### *Mutual Support/Self-Help Groups*

(e.g., for almost every problem)

### *Child Care/Preschool Centers*

### *Post Secondary Education Institutions/Students*

(e.g., community colleges, state universities, public and private colleges and universities, vocational colleges; specific schools within these such as Schools of Law, Education, Nursing, Dentistry)

### *Service Agencies*

(e.g., PTA/PTSA, United Way, clothing and food pantry, Visiting Nurses Association, Cancer Society, Catholic Charities, Red Cross, Salvation Army, volunteer agencies, legal aid society)

### *Service Clubs and Philanthropic Organizations*

(e.g., Lions Club, Rotary Club, Optimists, Assistance League, men's and women's clubs, League of Women Voters, veteran's groups, foundations)

### *Youth Agencies and Groups*

(e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, Y's, scouts, 4-H, Woodcraft Rangers)

### *Sports/Health/Fitness/Outdoor Groups*

(e.g., sports teams, athletic leagues, local gyms, conservation associations, Audubon Society)

### *Community Based Organizations*

(e.g., neighborhood associations, Neighborhood Watch, block clubs, housing project associations, economic development groups, civic associations)

### *Faith Community Institutions*

(e.g., congregations and subgroups, clergy associations, Interfaith Hunger Coalition)

### *Legal Assistance Groups*

(e.g., Public Counsel, schools of law)

### *Ethnic Associations*

(e.g., Committee for Armenian Students in Public Schools, Korean Youth Center, United Cambodian Community, African-American, Latino, Asian-Pacific, Native American Organizations)

### *Special Interest Associations and Clubs*

(e.g., Future Scientists and Engineers of America, pet owner and other animal-oriented groups)

### *Artists and Cultural Institutions*

(e.g., museums, art galleries, zoo, theater groups, motion picture studios, TV and radio stations, writers' organizations, instrumental/choral, drawing/painting, technology-based arts, literary clubs, collector's groups)

### *Businesses/Corporations/Unions*

(e.g., neighborhood business associations, chambers of commerce, local shops, restaurants, banks, AAA, Teamsters, school employee unions)

### *Media*

(e.g., newspapers, TV & radio, local access cable)

### *Family members, local residents, senior citizens groups*

**Please use the enclosed form to ask for what you need and to give us feedback.  
Also, send us information, ideas, and materials for the Clearinghouse.**

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