Collaboration: Starting and Structuring the Process

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The Next Generation Initiative supports local efforts to improve children’s academic achievement through a strategic, collaborative focus on two areas: strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences. The initiative supports the existing Duval County Public Schools Title I Neighborhood Learning Networks established in collaboration with the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida. Working with school-based Title I Family Involvement Centers, the Next Generation Initiative aims to increase collaboration among the schools and organizations serving children and families at both the district and neighborhood level.

The Next Generation Initiative is funded under the auspices of the Andrew A. Robinson Chair for Education and Economic Development, College of Education and Human Services, University of North Florida.
Key points

1. Collaborative groups should start with focused, concrete goals then build incrementally toward broad goals or address narrow goals in a more comprehensive fashion over time.
2. Governance structures should be flexible and responsive to changing needs and circumstances.
3. Planning and implementation are best conceived as parts of a cyclical rather than a linear process in which ideas are developed, tested, and refined over time.
4. Programs and strategies should be driven by a “theory of change,” a consensus on how proposed programs, services, and activities are expected to affect short- and long-term outcomes. They also should be aligned with the desired scope and magnitude of impact.

Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to clarify the purposes and meaning of collaboration and to identify lessons learned from similar initiatives that can guide the startup of the Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative (JNGI). The goal of JNGI is to support local efforts to improve children’s academic achievement through a strategic, collaborative focus on two areas: strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences. The initiative supports the existing Neighborhood Learning Networks (NLNs) of Title I schools created by the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida with Duval County Public Schools. Working with school-based Family Involvement Centers in five NLN neighborhoods (Arlington, College Gardens, Eastside, Ribault, and Springfield), JNGI aims to increase collaboration among the schools and organizations serving children and families at both the district and neighborhood level.

Why collaborate?

Increasingly, communities are coming to the conclusion that schools alone cannot improve child learning, particularly in neighborhoods where complex and persistent conditions of poverty, crime, and social isolation limit opportunities for child development. Collaboration marshals the talents and resources of the community to solve problems and to create new ways of organizing, delivering, and funding services in order to achieve better results, improve efficiency, and create a foundation of trust and communication for continuing improvement. The goal is “synergy” – achieving more by working together rather than in isolation.

What is collaboration?

The Wilder Research Center, which has conducted one of the most systematic reviews of research on collaboration, has developed the following working definition: “Collaboration is
a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals” (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001, p. 4). Characteristic of a collaborative relationship is a commitment to mutual goals and authority and to shared responsibility, accountability, resources, and rewards.

What does collaboration look like? Stakeholder collaboration can occur in different ways across major functions and within multiple geographic and organizational levels (see Figure 1). The strategies pursued will depend on which levels are addressed. For example, collaboration among the leaders of two or more local organizations might involve developing a strategic plan or forming a shared governance structure to make decisions about program priorities. Collaboration between local teachers and agency staff might involve creating a new system for identifying children’s needs and making service referrals.

Researchers at the Wilder Research Center distinguished among collaboration, coordination and cooperation (Mattessich et al., 2001). This distinction might be helpful for communication as the JNGI model develops. Generally, Wilder researchers saw the three terms falling on a continuum reflecting the amount of control organizations relinquish to
work collectively toward a common goal. *Cooperation* usually is unplanned and occurs informally among individuals in organizations without a common mission, plan, or governance structure. For example, a school principal might agree to distribute flyers to parents about a nonprofit organization’s after-school program. Going a step further, *coordination* involves a more formal relationship, with some degree of planning, division of roles and responsibilities, sharing of resources for specific projects, and the establishment of communication channels. For example, a school district and a local library may jointly plan and sponsor a family literacy program, with the library providing staff and books and the school providing facilities and recruiting participants. *Collaboration* involves a shared governance structure, common mission, comprehensive planning, and clear communication channels at multiple levels, as well as shared products and resources. For example, community organizations may form a new nonprofit entity as equal partners, develop a plan for integrated service delivery that will do more than the organizations can accomplish separately, share resources to put the plan into action, and establish clear communication at all organizational levels, from leaders to front-line workers, to ensure the plan’s implementation.

Whether cooperation, coordination, or collaboration is the most appropriate approach will depend on what partnering organizations aim to accomplish and what problems they are attempting to solve. No one approach is best. Also, participating organizations might begin by adopting a collaborative approach for some functions, such as planning, and a coordination approach for other functions, such as service delivery. Organizations might begin their partnership with cooperation or coordination and become more collaborative over time (Mattessich et al., 2001).

**What are characteristics of successful collaborations?**

Through a review of empirical research focusing specifically on collaboration, Mattessich et al. (2001) identified 20 factors that are associated with success (see Table 1). Using the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (see Resource section), members of the JNGI can review the strengths and weaknesses of their collaboration at the outset and track changes over time. Although this instrument has not been psychometrically validated, it has served as a useful tool for discussing varying perceptions and areas of weakness that need to be addressed.

The impact of collaboration on child and family outcomes is difficult to measure because these complex initiatives evolve over time and can take more than a decade to come to fruition. Also, because initiatives often involve many components simultaneously, teasing out the effects of one in particular is difficult. Nevertheless, through interviews with funders, policymakers and stakeholders, researchers have described important lessons learned by collaborative initiatives ranging from family resource centers to comprehensive community initiatives. Those relating to the structuring and startup of initiatives similar to JNGI are described in the remainder of this policy brief.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>1. History of collaboration or cooperation in the community (enabling trust in the collaborative process)</td>
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<td>2. Collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the community (on goals and activities undertaken)</td>
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<td>3. Favorable political and social climate (support from leaders, opinion-makers, resource controllers, general public)</td>
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<td>Membership</td>
<td>4. Mutual respect, understanding, and trust</td>
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<td>5. Appropriate cross section of members (includes each segment of the community affected by activities)</td>
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<td>6. Members see collaboration in their self-interest (see benefits as outweighing the costs, such as loss of turf)</td>
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<td>7. Ability to compromise</td>
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<td>Process and structure</td>
<td>8. Members share a stake in both process and outcome (ownership in the collaboration’s way of work and its products)</td>
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<td>9. Multiple layers of participation (some representation at all levels of partnering organizations)</td>
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<td>10. Flexibility (open to varied ways of organizing and accomplishing work)</td>
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<td>11. Development of clear roles and policy guidelines (which are well-understood by all partners)</td>
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<td>12. Adaptability (ability to sustain collaboration in the midst of major changes)</td>
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<td>13. Appropriate pace of development (structure, resources, and activities do not overwhelm capacity)</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
<td>14. Open and frequent communication (interact often, discuss issues openly, share necessary information within and outside the group)</td>
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<td>15. Established informal relationships and communication links (personal connections supporting cohesion)</td>
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<td>Purpose</td>
<td>16. Concrete, attainable goals and objectives (clear to all partners and realistic)</td>
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<td>17. Shared vision (clearly agreed-upon mission, objectives, strategy)</td>
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<td>18. Unique purpose (mission and goals or approaches differ in some way from those of member organizations)</td>
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<td>Resources</td>
<td>19. Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time (consistent financial base, staff and materials for operations, time to achieve goals, time to nurture collaboration)</td>
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<td>20. Skilled leadership (organizational and interpersonal skills; fairness; legitimacy)</td>
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Source: Mattessich et al., 2001, pp. 8-10
**Scope**

Generally, the scope of collaborative initiatives depends on the conditions in the community, funder priorities, desired results, and the existing capacities of the people, organizations, and communities involved (Trent & Chavis, 2009). Some are comprehensive from the start; however, doing too much too soon can overwhelm and derail the effort.

More successful are the *strategic driver* or *incremental* approaches, which can be adopted alone or in combination. The strategic driver approach targets a single issue – such as school readiness or employment – as a way to focus activities, while an incremental approach begins with one type of program activity and adds others as the initiative or the organization matures (Kubisch et al., 2002).

At this point the NLNs and the JNGI are supporting parent-involve initiatives that can be offered through Title I programming at specific urban schools with the goal of demonstrating that these initiatives can be reinforced and expanded through strategic partnerships at the community and neighborhood levels.

**Goals and objectives**

Initiatives vary in the number and range of outcomes they seek to affect (Stagner & Duran, 1997). For example, Family Resource Centers in Kentucky, through collaboration among schools and service agencies, aimed to provide the full range of services for children to succeed academically (Dupper & Poerter, 1997). The Harlem Children’s Zone provides a more comprehensive range of services from birth to college to improve not only children’s learning but also their health and social outcomes and, ultimately, the neighborhood (Harlem Children’s Zone, 2009).

Collaborations are inherently ambitious undertakings. It is important for goals and objectives to be in scale with the resources and capacity of the collaboration. Historically, a common pitfall has been promising too much and being unable to meet unrealistic expectations (Kubisch et al., 2002).

Initiatives seem to work best when they start with focused, concrete goals, then build incrementally toward broader goals or address narrow goals in a more comprehensive fashion over time. Because they can be interpreted in different ways, abstract goals are difficult to translate into strategies, actions, and measures of progress. Goals and objectives must be specific and clearly stated so that stakeholders can readily see when they are making progress (Kadushin, Lindholm, Ryan, Brodsky, & Saxe, 2005; Trent & Chavis, 2009).
Governance

What we have learned to date is that there is no single best form of governance for collaborations. Governance needs may vary depending on the developmental stage of the collaboration, the functions being performed (e.g., planning or service delivery), and practical considerations (such as legal constraints from funding sources). The key is to be flexible and responsive to changing needs and circumstances as they arise (Kubisch et al., 2002).

Three governance options are available for school-linked service collaborations: (1) select an existing agency to take the lead, (2) create a new nonprofit, or (3) establish a consortium of agencies that work as co-equals (Chaskin & Richman, 1993).

The key to governance is to be flexible and responsive to changing needs and circumstances as they arise.

If an existing single organization takes the lead, schools have a number of advantages, such as their central role in the community, access to children, data availability, existing administrative structure, and the recognition that they cannot improve educational outcomes by themselves. However, schools are at a disadvantage in that they are likely to be overwhelmed with the demands of schooling, unlikely to draw parents who have a history of negative experiences with schools, and may not be effective in meeting the needs of particular cultural or social groups. Also, if any single organization – school or otherwise – dominates, operational problems may arise, such as difficulty attracting funding and senior staff from other organizations or arranging supervision of on-site professional staff from other agencies (Chaskin & Richman, 1993; Gardner, 1993).

An alternative is a community-based approach involving the creation of a new entity or a consortium of existing agencies for shared governance. Although this approach would be more time-consuming and challenging to put into place, it offers several benefits, such as the capacity to provide more than one entry point to services and the recognition that institutions (e.g., community centers, churches, libraries) might be more central than schools in the lives of children and their families. Also, families’ perceptions of a community may not conform to the boundaries of the school zone (Gardner, 1993). New Beginnings in San Diego is an example of a shared governance model. The five collaborating agencies drafted a statement of common philosophy and an agreement for shared governance that were approved by their respective governing boards. Also, a different agency hosted and chaired the initiative’s executive committee each month (Jehl & Kirst, 1993).

The Family Involvement Centers at the center of the Neighborhood Learning Networks began in Duval County Public Schools with Title I funding. Roundtables of organizational representatives at the district and neighborhood level, once convened, could serve as formal structures for shared governance among the partner organizations.

Over time, shared governance may keep partner organizations invested, expand visibility in the community, and increase access to funding sources.
When first setting up a shared governance structure, partner organizations should negotiate roles and responsibilities. Over time, shared governance may keep partner organizations invested, expand visibility in the community, and increase access to funding sources. Comprehensive initiatives are vulnerable if they rely on a single person or organization to keep the initiative going.

**Planning**

No matter how it is conducted, planning takes a substantial commitment of time. Planning provides the opportunity to test what works and motivate people to commit to the effort. Starting with projects that show tangible, short-term results will help to avoid unrealistic expectations and to keep people engaged. At the same time, it is important to plan these short-term projects keeping the broader, long-term vision in mind (Kubisch et al., 2002).

It is critical to consider implementation as plans develop. For example, address not only what services will be provided, but also how families will be reached. Throughout, planning staff not lose sight of the big picture while working out the details, a tendency that grows as pressure mounts to get projects up and running. When planning is cut short, the result tends to be the addition of new services and programs perpetuating the status quo rather than systemic or institutional changes in the way the needs of children and their families are met (Gardner, 1993).

Planning and implementation are best conceived as parts of a cyclical rather than a linear process, in which ideas are developed, tested, and refined over time. Specific policies, practices, services, and materials could be developed or selected, then pilot-tested in one or more locations to assess feasibility of implementation and small-scale impact (Howard & Stone, 2009). The NLN initiative has already initiated this approach through pilot studies at the five NLN sites. When efforts do not yield desired results, review and revision should be seen as an opportunity to learn from experience, rather than as a sign of failure (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995).

Ideally, members of a planning team collectively will bring a number of characteristics to the table. Members should be well informed about the initiative. They should have access to senior executives of their organizations and personal experience at front-line and supervisory levels. They should have sufficient time to devote to planning, skill in working with people of diverse backgrounds, and a willingness to learn (Gardner, 1993).

It is important to include all influential groups in the planning process but not necessarily on the planning team. Some may prefer to provide input on a plan rather than take part in developing it. Parents and front-line staff (including teachers) are often
Parents and front-line staff (including teachers) are often overlooked in the planning process, but can be critical in identifying potential implementation problems. If not represented on the planning team, members of these groups can be involved through other means, such as focus groups or advisory councils (Gardner, 1993). Options for obtaining teacher input might include a focus group during a common planning time.

If involved early in the planning phase, parents might provide important insights that could enhance the success of the project. They also can serve a key role in engaging other parents and neighborhood residents. Members of a school district’s Title I Parent Advisory Council must provide input during planning, particularly those parents who have children in the schools targeted by the initiative. Members of the School Advisory Committee at each of the schools might also be involved. Such an approach would be consistent with provisions for meaningful parent involvement in Title I programs (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Part A, Section 1118).

Parental involvement can be a challenge in impoverished communities because residents tend to be more accustomed to being clients rather than decision makers, have a history of negative relationships with schools, or lack time during the school day because of work or care-giving obligations. Therefore, involving parents might require special incentives (such as gift certificates or stipends for participation), hiring parents as outreach workers, providing child care during planning meetings, or obtaining their participation at settings other than the school (Dupper & Poerter, 1997).

Programs and strategies

Programs and strategies should be driven by a theory of change, a consensus on how planned programs, services, and activities are expected to affect short- and long-term outcomes. Without a strong, logical rationale for selecting strategies, collaborating partners run the risk of choosing programs and services that organizations want to see funded or continued regardless of whether they are the best solution to achieve desired outcomes (Kadushin, et al., 2005).

Strategies also should be aligned with the desired scope and magnitude of impact (Trent & Chavis, 2009). To have a neighborhood-wide effect on children’s school readiness, it might be necessary to reach out to families unlikely to pursue services on their own. Likewise, a two-hour parenting skills program may not have much impact on parenting behavior at home, much less child learning. A more intensive program, with follow-up, might be required.

A broad system of children’s services can evolve through several steps: (1) improving the quality and quantity of primary services, (2) coordinating specialized services to improve access for children and families with multiple problems, and (3) organizing both primary and
specialized services into an integrated system that addresses the needs of all children (Chaskin & Richman, 1993).

In the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s (1995) New Futures projects, participants had a hard time making the shift from continuing direct services to changing the system of services, in part because of the time and energy required to do both. Timelines should account for continuing current efforts while designing new approaches. Also, collaborative goals, operations, and strategies should be re-examined periodically to ensure that they remain aligned as the initiative progresses.

Conclusion

Forming collaborations among child-serving organizations is not an easy task. No roadmap exists to follow. However, lessons learned from prior initiatives can guide the Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative as it moves forward. Collaborations require open, respectful communication as well as well-defined partnerships with clear goals, strategies, processes, and outcomes. Also, from the start, partners must have the political will to take some risks and change how they do business (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995).

Questions for Consideration

1. What are the goals of the initiative?
2. Are these goals best achieved through cooperation, coordination, or collaboration?
3. What are the key partnerships and relationships necessary for achieving each goal?
4. What is the agreed-upon theory of change for the partner organizations?
5. What short-term and long-term outcomes are expected?
6. What short-term successes could provide momentum to the initiative?
References


Resources

This toolkit includes information and resources to help schools work in partnership with families and communities to strengthen families, strengthen schools, and improve child outcomes.

A manual provides a practical guide for improving the coordination of education, health, and human services for at-risk children and families. The guide presents a five-stage process of group collaboration, with milestones and obstacles portrayed through vignettes and case studies.

This paper provides an introduction and technical information for community leaders seeking Promise Neighborhoods funding. Utilizing information obtained from local leaders in communities across the country, this document shares details regarding identifying a neighborhood, politics of implementation, programmatic strategy, organization and leadership strategy, and funding.

This questionnaire was designed for people planning or participating in collaborative projects. It can help the group assess its strengths and weaknesses on the 20 factors associated with successful collaborations.