Collaboration:
Promises and Pitfalls of Working Across Community Agencies to Develop a Fully Responsive School

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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.

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Key points

1. **Expectations of each partner’s role should be defined** at the onset of the project. However, role development is a formative process that continues to evolve as the project takes on new challenges and learns from existing ones.

2. **Include all stakeholders in the goal development process** to ensure collective ownership of the project. Clarity of goals and the timeframe needed to accomplish goals are essential in the development of a community project.

3. **Draft a realistic time line at the beginning of the project and share it with all stakeholders.**

4. **Focus on bridging the gap between the needs of the community and the goals of the project.** Leaders should have human and social capital that enables navigation between the professional and local community with increased ease.

Introduction

Collaboration is often seen as a solution to problems in many sectors of society (Morse, 2010). Many schools and communities have attempted partnerships to help provide beneficial outcomes to students. Within this brief, we examine the promising practices that create strong collaborative environments for implementing new programs. We also examine the pitfalls of collaboration where partnerships have fallen short so that we may avoid repeating them. While examining literature on collaboration at large and school-community partnerships specifically, we also examine the models for programs such as Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, the Harlem Children’s Zone, the New Futures Program, and Community Schools for specific examples of how programs can maximize efforts.

Role definition: How do we define roles in our project?

In recent years, collaborative cross-agency work has been seen as a necessity to help projects achieve goals. Nonprofit entities and municipal governments often have been forced to work together to achieve common goals (Agranoff, 2006; Morse, 2010). Those pressures have not been felt by schools to the same extent. While certain models such as the Harlem Children’s Zone have recently been extolled as approaches that tie schools to neighborhoods and communities, these types of programs still operate outside the normal rules and capacity associated with the average school. The challenge for schools is to identify aspects of collaboration within these programs that are necessary for the success of the project and adapt them to the context of the local school. Moreover, creating a productive partnership that includes many agencies can be difficult.

Therefore, one of the first steps in a collaborative project is role identification and development within clear governance structures (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009; White & Wehlage, 1995). A lack of clarity regarding which entity is charged with each task can lead to upheaval within the organization.

Looking at the pitfalls of prior collaborations helps us to learn from the mistakes of others.
Some organizations have attempted an alliance in which all the agencies have an equal partnership role. In some circumstances, this has made progress difficult because the process has become a continual conversation without definitive actions. This occurred in the San Francisco Communities of Opportunity where 15 city agencies were involved in the collaboration (Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009).

An alternative approach involves designating a lead agency to take on the task of performing the administrative functions of the partnership and to lead the charge for community change. To avoid power conflicts, the agency might be developed independently of all the other partner agencies. Several projects have noted that this may be a role well-suited for a university due to the commitment to objectivity by university faculty and staff members, which serves to shift the balance of power (Frabutt, Cabaniss, Kendrick, & Arbuckle, 2008; Kathi, Cooper, & Meek, 2004; MacKinnon-Lewis & Frabutt, 2001).

Having a partner agency step up to lead the effort can initially be seen as beneficial. However, the lead agency may find it necessary to take on more responsibilities than anticipated. To avoid this pitfall, the partnership should develop a clear governance structure with a designated lead agency that will coordinate the other agencies and assume the responsibility for sorting out the federal and state bureaucracies as well as local agency rules. Also, the lead agency should determine how to disseminate information about expectations for each partner and the restrictions limiting actions and funding. While subsequent conversations among partners might work out details, the initial information that the lead agency disseminates should lay the framework for partner’s expectations of each agency.

The Neighborhood Improvement Initiative of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation found that rules and mutual accountabilities had to be clarified in order for the program to work (Brown & Fiester, 2007). The lead agency may be the initiating entity that plans out the organization structure and works to develop the alliance among all the other partners. When the partners come together at large in the absence of a designated lead agency, the partners will need to invest time in clarifying and agreeing upon the details of the initiative.

Although it is important that a lead agency spearheads the effort, other key roles are necessary when developing a collaborative partnership. One role that may be key to the success of the project is that of a policy and compliance information official. This person would be charged with keeping record of the general regulations and requirements applicable to all the partners. Often, agency roles differ based on the level of the agency and the rules regulating particular funding streams. For example, foundations and other community agencies might mistakenly think that a state or local agency has the authority to create a program or enforce compliance in an existing program. Within the New Futures Project, lack of clarity on the role of the state and federal bureaucracy hindered the development of the project (White & Wehlage, 1995). Different
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funding streams might have different restrictions. Some agencies have considerable autonomy and authority and can become frustrated when other agencies do not come to the table with the same force. Often, this is interpreted as lack of commitment to the project, when the agency might not have the authority to act due to grant or policy restrictions. Therefore, a person whose role is to keep track of these policy and compliance requirements is key to avoiding initial misunderstandings that can hinder the development of a project.

Whatever roles the partner agencies assume should be explicitly defined with responsible staff identified. If people are transitioning between roles in a community setting and roles in a school setting, assistance might be needed to help them to adapt to the new roles. While each person’s skill set might be an asset, the development of new skills might be necessary in order to have a successful project. This might require additional technical assistance from other community projects or professional developers in higher education. For example, within the New Futures program, case managers were successful in their roles as youth advocates but not as information gatherers or cross-agency collaborators (White & Wehlage, 1995).

Some agencies and individuals have difficulty working together because they work from different assumptions about the cause of a problem. For example, if a community is impoverished, some agencies may attribute the cause of poverty to a lack of available jobs, others may attribute poverty to lack of high-quality schools, and others may attribute it to the breakdown of the family structure.

When various agency representatives offer solutions, they base their recommendations on their interpretation of the causes. Agency staff who attribute the problem to different causes may have difficulty working together. They may find that they all want to reduce poverty but may have different foci and methods to attack the problem. Although this can be a strength because multiple lenses are being applied to the issue, attempting to implement disparate solutions at one time can be problematic (White & Wehlage, 1995).

To avoid this dilemma, it is important that agency personnel meet and have explicit conversations about the causes of the problems confronting their communities and how their assumptions about the problems inform the theory of action and identification of solutions for each partner agency. Common goals can be the driver for these kinds of difficult conversations.

**Goal development: How should goals be developed for collaborative partnerships?**

The development and implementation of program goals require people and time. Power imbalance often occurs when various stakeholders are not able to engage in the goal development process (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009; White & Wehlage, 1995). In the New Futures program, the case managers that were carrying out the work had difficulty communicating with the program decision makers (White &
Wehlage, 1995). Therefore, they could not inform the evaluation process and assist in developing new ways to meet the goals. Also, within the New Futures Project, lack of minority representation eroded the faith of the direct service providers who felt like the project was yet another program started by outsiders that failed to ameliorate long-term community problems. In the Chicago Policy Research Team’s (2009) report on the Harlem Children’s Zone and the Rochester Children’s Zone, political fragmentation reportedly developed because the local politicians who had been working in the community for years felt they were left out of the decision making process.

These challenges can be overcome in a collaborative project. One of the lessons learned from the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative was to ensure that the sponsoring foundation board and staff are clear about the goals, strategies, risks, and time lines for the project (Brown & Fiester, 2007). To avoid this conflict in the Community Schools program, community leaders held a citizen’s planning conference every 3 years to agree on three priorities for action and the resources needed to address them, the partnerships that needed to be created, and the results that determined success (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003).

Those developing goals for a project should start small, take into consideration the problems of the local community, and target the priority issues. Having too many goals can undermine the success of the project (Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009).

A national or statewide social problem may not be the most pressing problem in the local community. Collaborative projects should select program goals that are representative of the community that is served. For example, the Harlem Children’s Zone (Tough, 2008) developed an asthma initiative based on a health problem that specifically affected their community. At the same time, what the partnership views as a problem may not be viewed as a problem in the community being served. For example, the New Futures Project policymakers thought teen pregnancy was a result of ignorance or irrational choices (White & Wehlage, 1995). However, they found that some teens did not view having a baby as a problem. As a result, the focus of their interventions (sex education and birth control) was inappropriate because for some of the teens, pregnancy was a conscious choice.

Collaborative project should rally around certain essential goals for the project. For many of the Community Schools, the goal was creating optimal conditions for student learning (Blank et al., 2003). While partnership goals may vary, most projects in a school setting focus on student learning as the optimal result. From the student learning goal, the partnership may work backwards and determine what is needed for students to learn and incorporate services based on that goal. Although student learning may be the goal for most school-based projects, schools should also help others in a collaborative meet their goals. The goal making process should include the goals of multiple service providers to create public value (Morse, 2010).

**When developing goals it is important to start small, consider neighborhood problems, and target issues of concern to the community.**

**Goals should be specific. The goal making process should integrate goals of multiple service providers to create public value.**
The goals of the program should be specific. It is not enough to say that the goal is to coordinate services (White & Wehlage, 1995). More specific questions need to be addressed. What services will be provided for the community? What outcomes will the services produce?

Program partners need also to recognize that some of the goals that they adopt have the potential to create controversy (White & Wehlage, 1995). Social problems are not easy to fix and may involve confronting issues of race, class, and gender. Parenting education and intervention may introduce controversial topics into the program. Partners need to discuss these issues during the formulation of goals and be ready for others to question the goals for the project. If these issues are not addressed in the initial stages, controversy about the goals might eclipse the program initiatives and hamper program implementation.

After the goals for a project are made explicit, the timeline for implementation of the goals must be addressed. Problems with collaboration can arise when partners do not believe that the program is operating at the desired rate of implementation. Many programs have gone awry when the funders, community leaders, or staff felt as if progress was too slow (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009).

Collaborative projects should draft a realistic timeline at the beginning of the project and share that timeline with all stakeholders. The timeline could include brief explanations of the tasks involved and estimations of which partners can complete each task. Sharing this information can frame the program and help all stakeholders understand the potential of the project and what is needed to help it materialize.

**What should we look for in leadership?**

A successful program requires dynamic leadership. Although every project cannot replicate Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children’s Zone, the selection of the person who will be the face of the project must be made thoughtfully. The leaders for an initiative should have enough human and social capital to make good organizational decisions and use social connections to work with private financiers and prominent political figures.

The progress of many organizations has come to a standstill when the organization did not have a strong leader who could inspire both the community being served and the funders and political leaders whose help is needed to ensure the success of the program (Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009). Leaders for a community collaborative project must be able to organize all the forces in a project to serve a common purpose (Morse, 2009).
Sometimes program staff and community members are intimidated by strong leadership. For example, the leaders in the grant making agency that controls the funds might have the ability to make overarching decisions. Leaders can decrease intimidation by first addressing the dynamic that differential status brings to the partnership and then encouraging mutual respect and operational transparency. If a partnership is not working well, mutual respect and transparency can assist leaders in addressing problems.

In the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, leaders attempted to cover the lack of capacity of program staff by rewriting proposals and other program documents, but their efforts created a further divide between the program staff and the leaders. With a transparent relationship at the beginning of the process, these issues might be avoided. At the same time, all members of a partnership need to remember that many grant making agencies give preference to programs with strong local commitment (Morse, 2009). An imbalance of power that breeds resentment can affect the stability of a program.

Another leadership pitfall that is commonly seen in community collaborative projects is detachment of leaders from the community being served. Leaders who live too far away from the neighborhood may undermine public confidence in them (Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009). The leader must be amenable to these concerns prior to selection and be able to function accordingly. Also, leaders who are unapproachable by the direct service providers and the community often harm the relationships that are needed to ensure the survival and success of the program (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Chicago Policy Research Team, 2009; White & Wehlage, 1995). If those providing services are disconnected from those making decisions about which services to provide and how they should be provided, staff members might become resentful because the decisions made at the board level do not match the reality of the local level.

To avoid these pitfalls, program staff should be given a mechanism to help shape or influence the policies of the organization. Communication between staff and leaders is essential to develop a cohesive voice in service delivery and to the public at large. Frequent communication helps all program staff to focus on the same goals, while working internally to refine the methods. Leaders should also take time to talk with community partners about what they could contribute and do well, as opposed to assigning them a role based on what the leaders regard as the strengths of the agency.

Leaders should also involve community members in the planning and development of the programming. In some community schools, youth advisories and parent advisories have a role in the project (Blank et al., 2003). The youth advisories are older students who learn about the programs,
help revise the programs, and give tours to funders and guests. The parent advisory members might host open houses, talent shows, and parent nights. Although these roles might differ based on the program, each group touched by the partnership should have a role in creating the collaboration so that the program is not solely defined by leaders. The partners in the collaborative should all be treated as change agents. Staff should not be relegated to technician roles only; students and parents should not be just recipients of services; and leadership board members should not be the only decision makers. Collaborative decision making and ownership are essential to the success of the partnership.

**Conclusion**

Collaborative projects often seem to be the answer to many of the issues that detract from the goal of a school having increased student achievement. After all, schools often lack the capacity to deliver services that are so often needed by the children in the community the school serves. Many organizations have tried to implement a school-community collaborative project. Some have been successful, and others have failed for a variety of reasons. Partners creating a school-community collaborative project should take to heart the lessons learned from other projects and use them to inform the creation of a project that best serves the local community in its context. Avoiding pitfalls in developing roles, identifying goals, and selecting leaders is key in ensuring that a program gets off to a successful start and continues for the years needed for successful implementation.

**Questions for Consideration**

1. How will roles and responsibilities be shared among collaborative partners?
2. What roles and responsibilities do members of each partner agency see for themselves within the project?
3. Will a lead agency be identified for the partnership? How will this agency’s roles and responsibilities differ from the roles and responsibilities of other agencies?
4. How will all stakeholders be involved in developing goals for the project?
5. What measures will be taken to ensure that the project activities appropriately align with the established goals?
6. Has a time line been established for the project? If so, how will this time line be shared with partner agencies and other stakeholders?
7. What measures will be taken to align the goals with the time line?
8. What members of the partner agencies can be most effective as liaisons with those being served?
References


