

In The Real World: School Partnerships

There are good school partnerships, and then there are bad school partnerships.

Christopher Peal

When it comes down to it, there are really only two types of partnerships: good ones and bad ones. The good partnerships obviously are those that work well. They run efficiently, effectively, and relatively flawlessly. They pull a sufficient number of key parties together for an agreed-upon, united cause. Without doubt, they represent a shining success for all involved, with children being the key recipients of their efforts.

Bad partnerships, on the other hand, sap your life's blood. They steal every other moment you have and haunt you in your sleep. Basically, they create two or three persons' worth of work for an administrator who, more often than not, ends up getting the blame for that partnership's shortcomings or ultimate failure.

To Partner or Not to Partner

When you enter into a partnership, you never know which of the two types that that new partnership will end up being. As educators, we of course optimistically hope that every venture we pursue will be golden. But deep inside, we all realize that some partnership efforts will fall to a lackluster death, carrying numerous fatalities along the way.

Knowing full well that the potential of any partnership—be it with parents, a community organization, or a business—could bear significant results, how can an administrator best hedge the bet and create a greater amount of good than not?

Choose your partners carefully. Aside from the givens that a school is where it is, that the parents whose children attend there are the parents you have to work with, and that the busi-

nesses and community organizations that most likely will work with you are either nearby or not, you should analyze potential partnership relationships carefully. Pick partners whose abilities enhance your school, whose beliefs match your community, and whose shared project focus is unwavering.

Know in advance what you and your partners would like to accomplish. Decide up front where you want the partnership to go. You don't have to spend hours writing a mission or purpose statement, but you should spend time agreeing upon what you want things to look like in the end.

Be willing to say "no thanks." If a potential partnership overlaps an already existing one, if it appears to have no purpose, or if there is no additional time in the day to cultivate it, decline from the onset. It's always better to do one or two partnerships really well than to do numerous ones with mediocrity.

Cut your losses early. Most administrators have a pretty clear sense if something is working or is not working early in the process. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis and make a wise decision accordingly if partnership indicators go sour.

Thank your partners often. Partnership member efforts should be recognized at every opportunity. Thank people frequently, citing specific actions and benefits they are making for the school.

Keep kids at the center of your work. In all things you do related to school, students must be at the center of your efforts. If children are not the primary beneficiaries of a school partnership's focus, that partnership should be terminated.

Here are some Web sites to consider:

www.communityschools.org/assessmentnew.pdf

This site contains a series of checklists to assist school and community leaders in creating and/or strengthening community school partnerships. These checklists can serve as a planning tool to develop strategies to strengthen your partnership, improve coordination of existing programs and services, and/or to expand current levels of support.

www.corpschoolpartners.org

The Council for Corporate & School Partnerships serves as a forum for the exchange of information, expertise, and ideas to ensure that partnerships between businesses and schools achieve their full potential for meeting key educational objectives.

www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa400.htm

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) assessed the issue of constructing school partnerships with families and community groups. It found that when schools regard their relationship with families as a partnership in which school and home share responsibility for children's learning, the result is an increase in the levels and types of parent involvement as well as the support that families demonstrate for the school.

<http://knowledgeloom.org/practices3.jsp?location=1&bpinterid=1051&spotlightid=1051>

The Knowledge Loom is a place for educators worldwide to review research that identifies promising practices related to various themes; view stories about the practices in real schools/districts; and learn to replicate the success of these practices in your own organizations. Add your own stories and knowledge to the collections and discover supporting organizations and resources, including annotated Web links.

From the field,

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