

## Developing Community Partnerships

*When the goal requires community support, sometimes you have to think outside the box.*

Paul Young

If you are looking for community support for your school, I have a story and advice to share with you. People have told me that I sometimes think outside the box. You've probably heard that overused cliché many times, but the cliché is relevant to this story, which I often share with principals.

Like mine, your school could be considered a box, and you probably manage what happens within that box very effectively, even though it requires a great amount of your time to do so. But for me, the constant focus on the box eventually grew tiring and I started looking outside my box for others that would help.

In my case, I needed to transform a low-performing school with a transient population, located in the poorest part of our city. Expectations were low, and at first it took all of our time and effort to build a structure in which kids wouldn't hurt each other and teachers could teach. But I realized that we needed more help from outside.

Although parents provided what they could, they couldn't match the opportunities that kids enjoyed in other schools. My kids deserved the same and I realized that, as the principal, I was the one who would have to create those opportunities in my school. To free myself for this effort, I empowered others to deal with some of the management tasks (e.g., schedules, assignments, maintenance, cafeteria supervision) that consumed so much of my time. Letting go was hard, but placing confidence in capable employees produced positive results and gave me time to work with the community outside our box.

What did my kids need from the community? Material things? Certainly. Many families didn't have money to buy nice clothes for their children. But what the kids needed more than anything else was additional time to learn. Without it, they would never be able to close the learning gaps that would keep

them from competing on a level playing field with kids from other schools as they advanced to middle and high school.

### Begin with a Vision

It took time, but as I ventured outside my box my vision for a healthier learning community became better focused. You have to begin with a vision by asking yourself these questions:

- What do you want your school to improve in five years?
- What must you and others do to share that vision?
- What must happen and what changes will occur both inside and outside the school if you achieve the vision?

A powerful vision motivates, energizes, and inspires people to work together toward common goals. It integrates hindsight and foresight into an aligned action. As I reflected on the questions above, I realized that investing my time in the development of a community-based after-school program would lead not only to an improved perception of our school, our students, and our staff, but would also produce higher levels of achievement. By inviting the community inside our box, we could showcase our needs, talk about common goals, and solicit help to create change. My most important work was to persuade and encourage community involvement.

### Volunteers: The Key to Effective Partnerships

We reached out to volunteers in the community to help in a variety of ways. We already had a school-based volunteer program that provided assistance to teachers by reading with children and extending the open hours of our library. But we needed many more for an after-school program and we recruited them, one by one, from faith-based and civic organizations, secondary schools, colleges, businesses, and senior citizen centers throughout our community. Eventually, we could count on more than 100 volunteers each week.

We were able to acquire free use of the basement fellowship hall of the church across the street from our school. There, we began with an after-school tutoring program for 20 of our most needy students. To sustain the fledgling program and provide administrative support, we needed funding. Here, my work on building strong relationships and commitment from the volunteers paid off. They had a network of connections throughout our community that they could call on for support. One result was that we were able to receive a mini-grant from United Way.

That was the beginning of what would be a 10-year transformation process. During that time, we have been able to create and sustain collaborative partnerships with a church, a community center, and numerous community agencies and businesses.

### **Developing the West After School Center**

After about four years of using the church basement, many of the volunteers who initially signed on to tutor kids after school became community leaders and used their connections to help construct a community center across the street from the school. Today, the center houses Head Start preschool classes, adult learning (GED) opportunities, a kitchen, and a computer lab, in addition to the West After School Center, which sponsors school-based after-school programs in partnership with three elementary schools.

Our community partnerships continue to grow. Volunteers come from churches, businesses, Big Brothers Big Sisters, colleges, public and private high schools, and home-school associations. We have received financial support from Rotary International, Kiwanis, banks, foundations, and private contributors. In every case, a connection was made, a relationship nurtured, and a partnership formed that supports the vision and mission—helping kids acquire skills and a love of learning that motivates them to graduate from high school.

What is the most important lesson that principals can take from my story? It's that you must not be afraid to lead. Leadership begins with a vision and strong desire to attain it. But to succeed, your vision must be shared and owned by other people. It takes time, perseverance, and a willingness to give and take to build community relationships that endure and provide long-term benefits. It can be done by leaders who think outside the box.

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### **On the Same Page**

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What specific initiative do we want the community involved in at our school?
2. How would community partnerships benefit our students?
3. How has our school interacted with community partners in the past?
4. What community partnerships could we develop that we already have?

### **How to Solicit Community Resources**

1. Conduct an assessment and prioritize your needs.
2. Determine how community partnerships and resources will help your efforts. Visit sites where effective school-community partnerships are in place.
3. Put together a team and empower others to work on your behalf.
4. Develop roles, responsibilities, and common agreements to guide partnerships.
5. Convene a group of key community connectors and plan when and how to solicit support.
6. Provide information and training for key connectors.
7. Encourage your connectors to set up important introductions for you.
8. Build relationships. Establish a win-win return on investment for all stakeholders' time and commitment.
9. Collect data and monitor progress.
10. Develop a public relations plan that recognizes and celebrates success.