

School-Community Partnerships for 21st Century Schools

Four types of partnerships can provide a variety of benefits for schools, families, and communities.

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According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005), one-third of entering ninth-grade students will drop out of high school before attaining a diploma, and another third will graduate unprepared for college or a good job. About half of the high schools in the nation's 35 largest cities have severe dropout rates—often as high as 50 percent. Only about 30 percent of high school students read proficiently, and more than a quarter read significantly below grade level.

To make matters worse, elementary and secondary teachers, critical for the success of these students, are themselves “dropping out” of our nation's schools. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that a third of all new teachers leave after three years, and 46 percent leave within five years. The commission estimates that the teacher dropout rate has grown by 50 percent during the past 15 years at a cost of roughly \$7 billion a year, as districts and states recruit, hire, and try to retain new teachers (Kopkowski, 2008). Teachers who leave the profession identify the following challenges as precipitating factors: lack of planning time (65 percent), too heavy a workload (60 percent), and problematic student behavior (53 percent) (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005).

Families, who are critical partners in the educational process, face significant challenges in raising the nation's children. A survey of diverse families in the U.S. conducted by the Search Institute found that parents feel like they're facing uphill battles in dealing with economic challenges, negative values in society, and community and neighborhood conditions. These challenges are particularly daunting for parents of teenagers, those facing economic stress, those with limited English proficiency,

and those who are not married or in a committed relationship (Roehlkepartain et al., 2002).

Creating School-Community Partnerships

School-community partnerships are one strategy for addressing these and other challenges related to effective teaching and learning in the 21st century. Schools can collaborate with a variety of community partners—individuals, businesses, and formal and informal community organizations—to ensure that all students have opportunities to learn, and that teachers and families are provided the support they need (Sanders, 2006). Here are the four most prevalent school-community partnerships:

Business Partnerships. The most common school-community linkages are partnerships with businesses, which can differ significantly in focus, scope, and content. These partnerships include small and large local businesses, as well as national corporations and franchises. Many of these partnerships focus on school improvement and student achievement. Partnership activities include providing mentors for individual students, donating school equipment, providing incentives for improved student outcomes, and participating in school fundraisers.

Business partnerships of all types are generally characterized as beneficial for students, families, communities, and the businesses themselves. However, in order to ensure successful partnerships, school administrators should be involved in the decision to partner with a business and in defining the nature and extent of the partnership. This is necessary to promote shared understanding of the partnership's goals, while avoiding misunderstandings and consequent resentment. Schools also should develop a plan for open communication and resolving

differences with business partners, as well as a process of evaluation to keep the partnership growing and effective.

University Partnerships. As community partners, universities play an increasingly important and unique role. They have the potential to increase the collaborative capacity of the key stakeholders through the provision of professional development. They also may bring an expertise that aids in the formal evaluation of school-community initiatives. Some university-involved initiatives focus on enhancing instruction in schools, others focus on student achievement or increasing parent involvement in schools, and still others focus on exposing students to a variety of careers.

Universities also are engaged in intensive collaboration with school administrators and teachers in the creation of professional development schools (PDSs). Successful PDSs create innovative coalitions of universities, schools of education, and public schools to develop exemplary teacher practice that maximizes student outcomes, supports the preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers, and encourages reflective inquiry. At their best, PDSs promote shared responsibility between public schools and universities for educational excellence. Successful initiatives require university faculty and administrators, as well as school faculty and administrators, who are comfortable in multiple domains and can facilitate meaningful dialogue and shared decision-making across inter- and intra-professional and experiential boundaries.

Service-Learning Partnerships. Although not as prevalent in the literature as business and university partnerships, service-learning partnerships are another popular form of community involvement in schools. Advocates of service learning argue that while education and intellectual achievement are necessary aspects of public education, equally important is a focus on community and civic participation. More than a decade ago, Ruggenberg (1993) argued that without the balance of both, “we give students the impression that acts of courage, compassion, duty, and commitment are rare, and surely done by extraordinary people; people much different from them.”

Service-learning partnerships provide students with opportunities to assist individuals or agencies in addressing social, environmental, or community needs. Field experiences can include working with emotionally or physically disabled children, planting community gardens, or assisting with infant care in local hospitals. The goals of service learning include building stronger neighborhoods and communities, creating more active and involved citizens, and transforming traditional classrooms for the 21st century.

Careful planning of field experiences by teachers, administrators, and supervisors is required to successfully incorporate students’ service-learning projects into the school curriculum, which should be adapted to include opportunities for students

to reflect on their service-learning experiences and tie them to academic content. Students also need opportunities to analyze the consequences of their work with authority figures at school and on the job.

School-linked Service Integration. Through school-linked service integration efforts, schools, social service agencies, and health providers attempt to provide more efficient service to children and families who need it. Documented benefits include behavioral and academic gains for students who receive intensive services; improved student attendance, immunization rates, and student conduct; and increased parent involvement. Studies further suggest that through integrated service programs, more students and families who need intensive services receive them (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2005; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2005).

Service integration initiatives that include family and community participation in their planning and development are likely to be most effective. The involvement of families and community representatives in integrating educational, social welfare, and public health services symbolizes a fundamental change in the structure and philosophy of school management, so that schools are more accessible to families and communities.

Community involvement in schools is an opportunity for a more democratic and participatory approach to school functioning—one that can enhance students’ achievement and well-being, build stronger schools that better support effective teachers and teaching, assist families in the challenging task of raising physically and emotionally healthy children, and revitalize communities. However, successful school-community partnerships require that partners have collaborative skills, common goals, structures for inclusive decision-making, and time for reflection and evaluation. In other words, community involvement in schools is at its best when:

It embodies a way of thinking and acting that recognizes the historic central role of schools in our communities—and the power of working together for a common good. Educating our children, yes, but also strengthening our families and communities so that, in turn, they can help make our schools even stronger and our children even more successful (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003).

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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 is the difference between service-learning partnerships and school-linked service integration?
2. What types of partnerships are available in our school community?
3. What types of partnerships have we entered in the past? What worked and what didn't?
4. What types of partnerships would be most beneficial to our school needs?