School-Community Partnerships

Voices from the Field

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This product is one of a series of practitioner briefs dedicated to highlighting concrete strategies that education leaders can use to increase equity in education by building supportive learning environments that meet students' social and emotional needs. One such strategy is school-community partnerships. Through partnerships with outside organizations and agencies, schools can provide more students with the learning conditions they need to thrive. MDRC, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the Education Trust recently released a brief that describes these partnerships and the evidence for them, and that reflects on how these partnerships can assist districts and schools in meeting the social and emotional needs of all students.[1]

The initial brief included some advice from three leaders of successful district-level partnership programs. This companion brief focuses specifically on these leaders' suggestions for how districts can create systems and structures that help schools build and sustain partnerships. It presents steps to (1) plan and implement partnerships, (2) build trusting relationships, and (3) promote partnerships' sustainability and long-term success.

Quotes from these three leaders throughout illuminate the rationale behind their advice. While the three leaders come from urban districts of varying sizes, much of their advice can apply to smaller districts and rural districts as well. They are:

- Andrea Bustamante, Executive Director, Community Schools Student Services, Oakland Unified School District

- Christopher Caruso, Senior Executive Director, Office of Community Schools, New York City Department of Education

- Alison McArthur, Director, Community Achieves, Metro Nashville Public Schools

Why Partnerships?

Respectful and collaborative school-community partnerships between schools and outside organizations and agencies can help school districts meet the needs of all students, especially those most marginalized by our current political and social systems. The leaders interviewed gave several reasons why their districts chose to promote school-community partnerships. One important reason is that they realized their districts did not have the resources and expertise to provide all the types of assistance that students and families in their communities needed. Another is that while principals, teachers, and other school staff members often play many roles and offer different forms of support to their students, partnerships with community organizations and agencies can free principals and teachers to focus more of their energy on teaching. Finally, partnerships built into the school system can involve a variety of governmental agencies and local and national organizations in helping all students to learn and thrive.

We realized that we really wanted to provide the support that students and families need, but the district can't do it all alone. We didn't have the resources, staffing, and expertise to provide all of the supports that students and families need. Now that we have additional partnerships, teachers can focus on teaching and work with partners to provide additional supports.
—Andrea Bustamante

Advice on How Districts Can Foster Partnerships

Districts may face many challenges in building partnership programs. This section discusses some tips from the three district leaders for addressing such challenges. The first part discusses how districts can help schools with successful planning and implementation, the second talks about the positions and systems needed to build productive relationships with partners, and the third discusses how districts can help make partnerships sustainable.

Planning and Implementation

The leaders interviewed felt that district-wide strategies for building school-community partnerships can encourage sound planning, preparation, evaluation, and continual improvement in ways that single schools and community partners cannot do on their own. Here are some of their recommendations to that end:

■ **Strategic planning:** The leaders suggested that districts can set up systems that give partner organizations, parents, and community members a voice in planning efforts by including them formally in assessments of schools' assets and needs and in the development of schools' strategic plans. Partner organizations may have a special understanding of and connections to the community, and can play an important role in helping schools assess their assets and needs in a way that pays attention to structural racism, bias, and income inequality.[2] They

can also help schools develop strategic plans that focus on these issues and explicitly discuss what is needed to build healthy learning environments for all students.

> *We think it is really important that whatever schools are doing to define their goals, that any community partners are involved in the goal setting and the work of the community partners should help move the school toward these common goals.—Chris Caruso*

> *It's really important to look to see what's in place already and get an inventory of everything that's happening. To do this, you need to have everyone at the table. Communicate, communicate, and communicate some more.—Alison McArthur*

■ **Getting partnerships to schools with the most need:** Districts can see that partnerships are deployed to benefit the schools that need them the most. All three of the district leaders interviewed said their districts work to get funding and other resources for partnerships to schools with the most need.

> *Core to this work is an equity strategy with the knowledge that as incomes for our wealthiest families are rising, opportunities are increasing for students that are not equitably distributed across our neighborhoods. When we think about where we are going to invest limited resources, we are thinking about traditionally underserved schools, we're looking at schools that have fewer extracurricular programs or don't have the same access to certain types of academic enrichment programs. We are looking toward indicators of poverty. We're looking at chronic absentee rates and health rates, and then we are making our investments in our schools that meet certain criteria.—Chris Caruso*

■ **Data sharing:** All three of the district leaders interviewed felt that schools and partner organizations had to share data to make the partnerships succeed. They suggested that districts create templates of data-sharing agreements and help schools and partner organizations through the legal process of creating and maintaining these agreements.[3] Metro Nashville Public Schools, for example, has a system in place for partners that work with a group of students at least nine times during the school year. Such partners can get reports that compare their students' attendance, discipline, and grades, among other indicators, with those of the rest of the school. The partners can also see individual data on those students whose parents or guardians consent to giving them access.

■ **Data analysis:** Districts can help schools and their partners identify important data to collect and analyze (including surveys of students and families), set realistic performance targets,

and use data to make effective decisions.[4] The Office of Community Schools at the New York City Department of Education has paid particular attention to training superintendents and principals to use data to identify root causes of problems and to further continual improvement efforts.[5]

> *At first, schools were very reluctant to share data. They feared being shamed. That has not been our experience. Sharing the data and explaining it has really brought people together to solve issues and has been a huge success for us. —Alison McArthur*

- **Vetting partners:** Andrea Bustamante explained that Oakland Unified School District had success using a formal application process to vet possible partner organizations.[6] Potential partners submit a short inquiry form and, if accepted, create a contract with the district and are added to the district's database of partners. This process can help ensure partner organizations are grounded in the community, have the cultural competence needed to work effectively with students, and can help the district advance toward its equity goals.

> *Formalizing our partnerships has been a huge success as it has allowed for the alignment of common goals and outcomes. Partners have always wanted to be a support to schools but didn't always have information about the school's goals. Now we've created a space to have that conversation and to align goals. —Andrea Bustamante*

Building Productive Relationships

The three district leaders explained that having the right people in place and putting time and effort into building trusting relationships is important to creating productive partnerships. Here are some ways they suggested districts can cultivate strong relationships.

- **District champion:** All three district leaders interviewed felt it was important to have a champion for partnerships at the district or city leadership level. When superintendents, mayors, and other top local leaders make a point of talking about the value of school-community partnerships in public, they can help build a constituency for them. District administrators who want to expand school-community partnerships should consider encouraging the superintendent or other top leaders to promote these partnerships.

> *Having a district superintendent that is vocal and clarifies expectations is really important. The district plays a huge role in leading this work. —Chris Caruso*

One of the things that was successful for Oakland is that we had a couple of champions: the superintendent and an internal but outward-facing staff member who understands community needs. A champion at the top and a staff person that can really focus on the work together can create a place where you can start to align across the different departments and create common expectations around how you implement a partnership. We were able to say to partners, "Here is the process, and here is who you call."—Andrea Bustamante

- **District coordinator:** All three district leaders suggested it was important to have a district-level coordinator (or team of coordinators for a larger district) dedicated to school-community partnerships, to send the message that these partnerships are valued and to ensure schools and partners get the help and information they need when they need it.

We've developed a team of professionals that know how to facilitate and mediate difficult conversations [between schools and partner organizations]. This has led to trust, which is so vital. The team is responsive, is willing to admit when we don't know the answer, and is willing to find the answer. We refuse to fall into the trap of unanswered questions. I think building that trust and those relationships is really important. Relationships are critical to this work.—Chris Caruso

- **On-site manager:** All three district leaders also said that an on-site manager at each school can be extremely important to a successful school partnership. The districts had different titles for these managers and the managers could be school employees, district employees, or employees of a coordinating partner organization. In some cases, the managers worked with a single school and in other cases a manager might work with two schools, depending on the available funding. These managers coordinate all partnership activities, maintain relationships, and ensure that the school and partners are communicating well.[7] Ideally, this person has the experience and authority to take on a management-level role.

This person is the chief external affairs officer for the school, networking and solidifying key relationships in the community, and garnering and cultivating those relationships. This person serves a role within the school similar to an assistant principal, attending and facilitating key meetings. We made an intentional decision to make the role at a leadership level because it requires a level of gravitas, weight, and authority so that the person can drive change and not require the principal to follow up on every detail.—Chris Caruso

- **Training for principals:** The three leaders also agreed that it is important to provide guidance and training for school principals and other administrators on how best to engage with part-

ners. It is not easy to bring more voices into school decisions, and busy principals can often use guidance on best practices.

> *Support for schools is important. You can't assume that schools know how to work with partners. We often speak different languages. Educators are so bad about speaking in acronyms! We really need to work with schools on being transparent and building collaborative leadership with parents and partners.*
> *—Alison McArthur*

> *This work is changing long-standing mindsets about educational leadership. When this work is most effective we have collaborative leadership and shared responsibility and in order for that to happen, it takes a confidence in princi-pals and superintendents to cede some of their authority to parents, commu-nity partners, and nonprofit organizations, and that is hard.—Chris Caruso*

- **Training for partners:** All three district leaders also recommended that districts reinforce the training of partner organizations. Partner organizations and agencies are in the best position to advance a school's progress toward its equity goals if their staff members understand how social and emotional well-being undergirds a child's ability to learn and develop. District leaders can help staff members of partner organizations gain this understanding by including them in training offered to school staff members related to social and emotional well-being and development; restorative behavioral practices that develop community and manage con-flict; and equity. That way students can get a consistent message that they are valued and experience similar developmental and behavioral support during school and in after-school programs.

> *Partners love and need the training that we give to teachers. This is a great way for school districts to contribute to the partnership.—Alison McArthur*

Sustainability

To truly reap the benefits that come with well-developed and long-term partnerships, the three leaders said, districts should play a role in helping to ensure sustainability by diversifying fund-ing and securing long-term contracts with successful partner organizations.

- **Funding strategies:** The three district partners discussed a wide variety of sources of fund-ing. Each district was managing funds from different entities with different requirements while working to maintain a consistent program for schools. Funding for school-community partnerships can come from city and county governments, state governments, the federal government, foundations, and corporations.[8] Some partner organizations and agencies can

supply services and extended learning opportunities to schools for free, but schools still need funding to manage and coordinate these partnerships. Developing district-level funding streams can create stability that allows schools to nurture and grow their partnerships.

> *We had to make some difficult decisions and repurpose funds to do this work. We needed to demonstrate that partnerships could be successful and then figure out ways to repurpose funds and bring in new money to schools and communities in a coherent way.—Chris Caruso*

■ **Investment of schools:** To ensure schools are invested in partnerships, it often makes sense for districts to fund their early development but for schools to take on some of the costs over time. For example, Metro Nashville Public Schools funds 29 on-site managers. As a way to expand to more schools, it is pilot testing school-funded partnerships (where the school pays for the on-site manager position) in five additional schools. Schools in the district contribute in other ways as well, including by funding some partner programs and extended learning time (after-school programs), and by funding family and community events.

■ **Long-term contracts:** Building a productive relationship takes time, and districts and schools may be better served by entering longer-term partnerships. While it is important for schools to be able to change partners when they do not share goals, the three district leaders said it is also important to encourage lasting relationships and long-term contracts with effective partners. Districts and schools also often face leadership turnover, and longer-term partnerships can offer some continuity for teachers, students, and families during transitions. The New York City Department of Education, for instance, works to create six-year contracts with its partner organizations.

> *We work with a lot of resilient schools but also schools that are fragile. If principals are feeling pressure, there is less incentive to trust others, and creating trust and true partnership is really hard work. It is not something that happens overnight, and you can't just fund it or force it. It's a long process. The adaptive mindset shift is one of the harder parts of this work.—Chris Caruso*

Conclusion

School-community partnerships are a popular evidence-based tool for bringing additional resources and services into schools. They are not easy to implement, but districts can foster these partnerships to advance educational equity by helping schools with planning, relationship building, and sustainability.

NOTES

1   Susan Sepanik and Kevin Thaddeus Brown, Jr., "School-Community Partnerships" (New York: MDRC, 2021).

2   For assets and needs assessments, see examples from the New York City Department of Education Office of Community Schools and the National Center for Community Schools. New York City Department of Education Office of Community Schools, "Assets & Needs Assessment Tool and Process" (website: www.nyscommunityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Copy-of-Community-Schools-Assets-and-Needs-Assessment-Tool_PHASE-1.pdf, 2019); National Center for Community Schools, "Needs Assessment Design Packet (website: www.csstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Needs-Assessment-1.pdf, 2016).

3   U.S. Department of Education, *Data-Sharing Tool Kit for Communities: How to Leverage Community Relationships While Protecting Student Privacy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

4   Shital C. Shah, Katrina Brink, Rebecca London, Shelly Masur, and Gisell Quihuis, *Community Schools Evaluation Toolkit* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, 2009).

5   New York City Department of Education, *Continuous Improvement: A Guide for Educators and Practitioners in New York City Schools*. (New York: New York City Department of Education, n.d.), available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1h1YFeIg8lWVKuQUfKR_Oo9iEnrZEcg9P/view, accessed on July 9, 2021.

6   Oakland Unified School District, "Community Partnerships" (website: www.ousd.org/Page/11080, n.d.).

7   Oakland Unified School District, "About Community School Managers" (website: www.ousd.org/Page/13989, n.d.).

8   Martin J. Blank, Reuben Jacobson, Atelia Melaville, and Sarah S. Pearson, *Financing Community Schools: Leveraging Resources to Support Student Success* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, 2010).