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School-Community Partnerships

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This practitioner brief is one of a series highlighting concrete strategies that education leaders can use to increase equity in education by building learning environments that meet all students' social and emotional needs. Researchers have found that students flourish and engage in school when their learning environments provide the following conditions: (1) a way to meet unmet basic physical needs; (2) physical and psychological safety, as well as an environment of social and cultural respect; (3) supportive relationships with their teachers and other adults in school that promote learning and development; and (4) opportunities to have their voices heard in shaping their school environment.[1] When students experience these four conditions, they develop a sense of belonging and being valued and are more likely to engage in learning.[2]

Unfortunately, many of our nation's children are less likely to experience these four conditions because of economic inequality, our limited social safety net, systemic racism, and prejudice, among other societal issues. A school system can only create equitable learning environments when it recognizes the disparities in students' in- and out-of-school experiences and provides all students with the social and emotional conditions they need in order to learn.

The challenge is that schools and school districts are being asked to provide more and more services for students while being given few additional resources. This brief discusses how school districts can use partnerships with outside organizations and agencies to help provide those additional services. It discusses the evidence on whether partnerships can effectively promote students' social and emotional well-being and their academic success. It further reflects on how districts and schools can expand these partnerships to assist school transformation at three levels—the structural and policy level, the staff level, and the program level—while weaving in practical advice from district leaders with successful district-wide partnership systems.

What Are School-Community Partnerships?

School-community partnerships are respectful and collaborative partnerships between schools and outside organizations and agencies that can help school districts meet the needs of all students, espe-

cially those most marginalized by our current political and social systems. Partner organizations and agencies can provide additional academic enrichment activities during and outside of normal school hours, tutoring and behavior support for students, a variety of services and referrals to additional social and health services for students and their families who need them, and additional opportunities to engage families and community members.

School-community partnerships come in different forms. Some schools have one partnership with one agency to bring specific services to a subgroup of students. At the other end of the spectrum, community schools partner with several agencies and organizations to offer a variety of services and enrichment activities for the entire community while also working to ensure students, families, and community members can participate in school decisions (see Box 1).

BOX 1 Some Common Kinds of Partnerships*

ORGANIZATION OR AGENCY COLLABORATIONS

A school collaborates with one or more agency to provide students and families with health or social services, or collaborates with a community-based or national nonprofit organization to offer students academic enrichment during or outside of school time.

FULL-SERVICE SCHOOLS

A school partners with several organizations and agencies to offer a variety of social, health, and academic enrichment services and activities to students, families, and community members. These activities happen at the school, both during and outside of normal school hours.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

A school makes the same type of partnerships as a full-service school, and also ensures that partner organizations, parents and families, and other community members can all participate in school and partnership planning and decision-making.

NOTE: *Adapted from Linda Valli, Amanda Stefanski, and Reuben Jacobson, "Typologizing School-Community Partnerships: A Framework for Analysis and Action," *Urban Education* 51, 7 (2016): 719–747.

School-Community Partnerships Have Proven to Be Effective

Research suggests that by building school-community partnerships, districts can provide students with better opportunities to succeed. Studies show these partnerships can lead to:

- Stronger social and emotional skills development

- Enhanced student engagement (higher attendance rates and lower chronic absenteeism)

- Improved academic outcomes (higher test scores and better grades, higher rates of on-time grade promotion, and higher graduation rates)

The research on the most intensive version of these partnerships, community schools, is particularly revealing. A recent study of the New York City Community Schools Initiative—a large-scale, district initiative to create and strengthen community schools across the city—shows positive results for partnerships that combine expanded learning time, support services, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership (sharing decision-making among partners, families, and communities). In particular, the study found reduced chronic absenteeism across grade levels, better on-time grade progression for elementary and middle school students and graduation for high school students, reduced disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students, and improved math achievement during the final year of a three-year study (though there was no improvement in reading achievement during any of the years).[3] Other, earlier studies suggest that when operating well (usually after several years), community schools are associated with better attendance and higher test scores and grades, especially in mathematics.[4]

There is also some evidence on certain types of partnerships. For example, partnerships that offer expanded learning opportunities through additional **academic enrichment activities** have been the subject of many rigorous studies, and syntheses of findings suggest that high-quality after-school and summer programs are associated with positive student outcomes including higher math and reading achievement and better social and emotional skills development.[5]

A handful of rigorous studies have also examined **student support services** provided through partnerships. These include a wide range of services provided to students and families, such as health and mental health services, tutoring, counseling, and behavioral support, as well as assistance with housing, food, and clothing. These services can be provided to students directly at school, or through referrals to outside agencies. While results from these studies are mixed, there are some promising findings suggesting that individually tailored services integrated into a comprehensive package (that provides academic support, attendance and behavior support, social services, and physical and mental health services) may be associated with higher academic achievement (especially in math), better attendance, better engagement in school, and better relationships with peers and adults.[6]

There is little rigorous research on school programs that promote **family and community engagement**, but some studies have found associations between parent engagement and student success. Syntheses of several studies suggest that programs working to engage parents and caretakers can have positive effects on student achievement and behavior, especially when they work to build collaborative and trusting relationships with families.[7]

A recent Learning Policy Institute report found that many different types of school-community partnerships have sufficient evidence to qualify as "evidence-based" under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).[8] According to the report, state and local policymakers can consider school-community partnerships in their plans for low-performing schools, as strong partnerships may help close the opportunity and achievement gap for students from families with low incomes, students of color, students learning English, and students with disabilities.[9]

Partnerships at Three Levels

Partner organizations can help schools and districts build and strengthen healthy learning environments by bringing in additional programs and services and providing additional opportunities for schools to connect with families and other local community members. Much of what partner organizations can bring to schools occurs at the program level, as organizations provide direct services to students. But schools and districts working to become more equitable and healthy learning environments for all students should further consider how to build their partnerships at the staff level and the structural and policy level, to make sure partners and schools are working in unison. This section starts by discussing the programs and interventions partnerships can bring to schools. It then discusses how schools and districts can build on this foundation at the staff level and at the structural and policy level. The section includes advice drawn from interviews with leaders of districts with successful school-community partnership programs (see Box 2).

BOX 1 The Experts

Much thanks to the three district leaders who shared their insights on building and sustaining successful partnership systems, insights that are infused into this brief. 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

The Program Level

When schools partner with community organizations and agencies, they can offer their students extra resources to meet their needs, and opportunities to have supportive relationships with caring adults, shape their environments, and feel valued. The most advantageous partners are those that build on young people's strengths rather than focusing on their needs, that are sensitive to cultural differences, and that can help schools address language barriers. Here are some ways partnerships can transform a school's educational environment:

- **PROVIDING ADDITIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE NORMAL SCHOOL DAY.** One large disparity between students from families with higher and lower incomes is in the amount of educational and enrichment experiences students receive outside of school. On average, students from higher-income backgrounds participate in many more hours of organized activities than their peers from lower-income backgrounds.[10] Partnerships can expand these learning opportunities for students, both during and outside of normal school hours and both within the school building and outside of school (through activities like summer camp and job internships). Several studies have shown that when young people are participating in these types of enrichment activities, they report higher levels of challenge and engagement than they do in other settings.[11] Particularly valuable are challenging and collaborative educational experiences that connect with the learning going on in students' classes and that offer students opportunities for inquiry and critical thinking.[12] Additional learning time also tends to be more flexible, and can give students control over what they are learning and how they learn it.

- **OFFERING INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES.** Having your physical needs met and feeling physically and psychologically safe are two important conditions for engagement and learning. Students from lower-income neighborhoods may not have the same access to resources and services as their counterparts in middle- and higher-income neighborhoods. Schools can partner with organizations and agencies that offer students and families services such as community-based health and social services; attendance, behavior, and academic support; and counseling and mental health support. These individually tailored services meet the direct needs of students and their families in ways that can make it easier for students to focus on school.[13]

- **SUPPLYING ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS.** Relationships with adults are critical to students' engagement in learning. They allow students to explore and practice roles and behaviors and build their ability to make choices about their lives, so they can take an active role in creating their own paths.[14] Unfortunately, some children do not receive the time and attention from adults outside of school that they need for their development. There are many reasons they may not, including reasons outside of parents'

and adult family members' control. For example, some parents or caretakers have to work more than one job, and some suffer from stress caused by societal issues that leaves them less attentive than they would otherwise be. When children lack attention from adults outside of school, they may seek it in school. One value of partnerships is that they bring additional caring adults into the school building who can offer students the additional attention they deserve, in particular adults who reflect students' backgrounds. There is a considerable gap between the racial and ethnic diversity of students in U.S. public schools and that of their teachers, leaving many students of color with relatively few opportunities to interact with adults who look like them.[15] While the ultimate fix to this problem is to diversify the teaching profession, community organizations can offer a short-term solution by bringing to a school more diverse staff members, including local community members.

■ **CREATING DEEPER CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.** Students must feel they belong and are valued if they are to engage in learning. Unfortunately, decades of systemic racism and classism have often led families of color and families from low-income backgrounds to mistrust the schools that serve them. Trust between families and schools can help build students' sense of belonging at the school. When a school partners with a community-based organization, families may see the partner organization as part of their local community, creating a link between the school and community through the organization. These partners can also help schools build curricula and practices that affirm the cultures and backgrounds of their students, which can help better connect families with the schools. Community partners can create an opportunity for families' voices to be heard at the school, and those voices can provide insight into the bias and structural racism families experience in the system. Some organizations may also provide direct services to families and other community members at the school, converting the school into a community hub.

The Staff Level

Partner organizations and agencies are in the best position to support a school's equity goals if their staff members understand how social and emotional well-being undergirds a child's ability to learn and develop. District and school leaders can help ensure that 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, behavioral practices that develop community and manage conflict, 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.

Here are some other ways that districts can help support both school and program staff members to create healthy learning environments for all students.

- Districts can consider creating a district-level coordinator position 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.

- Districts may also want to consider working with schools and partner organizations to create a formal district-level qualification process for partners. (The Oakland Unified School District provides an example.)[16] A formal vetting process can help ensure partner organizations are grounded in the community, have the cultural competence needed to work effectively with students, and can help districts advance toward their equity goals.

- Successful partnership systems often hire an on-site manager (also known as a community school coordinator) at each school to coordinate all partnership activities, maintain relationships, and ensure that the school and partners are communicating well.[17] This person also coordinates enrichment, social and emotional, and academic programs to make sure the right services get to the right students. Ideally, this person has the experience and authority to take on a management-level role, as the manager plays an important role in using school-community partnerships to create a robust learning environment.

- Districts can also provide guidance and training for school principals and other administrators on how best to engage with partners. It is not easy to bring more voices into school decisions, and busy principals can often use guidance on best practices.

- Building relationships 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, a district can 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 Structure and Policy Level

Partner organizations can play a substantial role in helping school districts to reexamine their policies and structures, with the goal of building more equitable and healthy learning environments. District and school leaders can start this process by offering partner organizations a stronger voice in school decisions—along with students, families, and community members. For example, community schools (see Box 1) strive to include all voices in school decision-making by creating forums that offer opportunities for authentic dialogue among the school, partners, families, and other community members, and by ensuring all these groups are involved in assets and needs assessments that pay attention to structural racism, bias, and income inequality.[18] Partner organizations, with their special understanding of and connections to the community, can help develop a school's

strategic plan, which should focus in on these issues and make plans that explicitly work to build a healthy learning environment.

Districts can further assist schools in building and preserving partnerships that transform learning environments at the structural level in the following ways:

- 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 these partnerships.

- Districts can enable the creation of data-sharing agreements between schools and partner organizations.[19] Districts can also 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.[20]

- Districts can play a vital role in ensuring partnerships contribute to equity goals by seeing that they are deployed to benefit the students who need them the most.

- Funding strategies for school-community partnerships often include local (city and county), state, federal, and foundation/corporate funding.[21] Some partner organizations and agencies can supply support services and extended learning opportunities for free to schools, 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. To ensure schools are invested in the work, it often makes sense for districts to fund the early development of partnerships, but for schools to take on some of the costs over time. For example, the district may fund an on-site manager in the early years but require that a school take over the expense once the position is established.

Conclusion

> *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 principals and superintendents to cede some of their authority to parents, community partners, and nonprofit organizations, and that is hard. — Chris Caruso, senior executive director of the Office of Community Schools, New York City Department of Education*

School-community partnerships are a popular evidence-based tool for bringing additional resources and services into schools. It is not easy to implement them well. But if a district uses partnerships in a way that supports schools at the program, staff, and policy levels, it can help schools transform into healthy learning environments where all students experience the conditions they need to learn and grow to their greatest potential.

A FEW USEFUL RESOURCES

Here are some resources that can help districts get started building school-community partnership systems.

A detailed "how-to" manual on building school-community partnership systems

- Sarah Costelloe and I-Fang Cheng, *Partnering for Student Success: A Practical Guide to School Based Partnerships* (Rockville, MD: Abt Associates, 2016).

A framework for building successful community schools

- Reuben Jacobson and Martin J. Blank, *A Framework for More and Better Learning Through Community-School Partnerships* (Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, Coalition for Community Schools, 2015).

Tools for starting and building community schools

- Center for Community School Strategies, "Community Schools Toolkit."

- New York City Department of Education, *Community Schools: A Guide to Getting Started* (New York: New York City Department of Education, 2019).

An action guide for building effective integrated student support systems

- Center for Optimized Student Support, Boston College, *The Whole Child: Building Systems of Integrated Student Support During and After COVID-19* (Boston: Center for Optimized Student Support, Boston College, 2020).

A state policy toolkit for promoting integrated student support systems

- Center for Optimized Student Support, Boston College, City Connects, and Communities In Schools, *Integrated Students Supports State Policy Toolkit* (Arlington, VA: Communities In Schools, 2019).

NOTES

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7   Maier, Daniel, Oakes, and Lam (2017); Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, 2002); William H. Jeynes, "A Meta-Analysis of the Efficacy of Different Types of Parental Involvement Programs for Urban Students," *Urban Education* 47, 4 (2012): 706–742.

8   The ESSA standard is that a program qualifies as evidence-based if it has one well-developed and well-implemented study showing a statistically significant effect on a student outcome.

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18 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).

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