Enhancing Service through Effective School/ Community Collaboration

By Elizabeth Mastro and Mary Grenz Jalloh

> *"We can never get into the schools."*
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> *"We hold trainings, but the schools never come."*
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> *"That group (community agency) came into one of my classes and the parents were very angry. I can't ever have them back again."*
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> *"They (community providers) always have trainings during testing week."*

Whether voiced from providers in community agencies or members of the school community, these comments reflect the perception of resistance between schools and the communities within which they exist. Many community organizations are charged with serving school-aged youth, or providing educational programming for youth. During the hours of 8 AM to 3 PM, schools hold a captive youth audience. Recognizing that schools have 181 instructional days and community organizations often struggle with very limited resources, it is simply impossible for either entity alone to fully meet the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of youth. Schools alone cannot meet all

needs, yet they stand as gatekeepers for access to youth during most of the day. School personnel, service providers, families and youth agree that it is a natural fit to combine the resources of both fronts to maximize efforts to promote youth development. This issue of PrACTice Matters outlines some of challenges to and strategies for collaboration and synergy between school and community groups to enhance positive youth outcomes.

There is growing evidence that successful collaboration between school and community groups has led to improved academic and social/emotional outcomes of youth. More and more, this connection is being acknowledged through funding mechanisms that require formal partnerships be developed, and programming be created based on the principles of youth development (for example, the United States Department of Education's 21st Community Learning Center Program). Research also shows that collaborative efforts have provided youth with richer, authentic learning experiences that have enhanced connections to school and are making an impact on reducing dropout rates and increasing attendance rates. So with all these great things happening, why is it still so difficult for successful collaboration to take place?

Challenges: As noted in the quotes above, schools are perceived (and sometimes rightly so) as strongly resistant to working outside of school building walls. Several factors have fueled this perception.

- *Focus on academic achievement*: With the sweeping impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal education legislation, schools have found themselves increasingly judged on

limited academic data points: namely 4th grade and 8th grade English and Math test scores. If scores are not acceptable, schools must develop improvement plans, implement those plans, and show significant progress based on test scores, within three years. Scores are public, and communities judge their schools against those in other similar communities. Schools that do not make rapid enough improvement are given increasingly "dreaded" designations. This impacts the perception of the school within the community, with consequences such as the community rejection of school budget proposals. With the movement to full implementation of NCLB, students will be tested at almost every grade in addition to 4th and 8th grade. Understandably, schools feel pressure to focus on the immediate academic needs and channel time, money and human resources inwardly to deal with those issues. Another issue may be a perception that collaboration with an organization outside the school is irrelevant to what they are being pressured to accomplish – a feeling of "what can you do for my test scores?"

- *Scheduling:* The academic focus also has spawned tangential issues that schools feel prevent them from collaborating. One of these issues is scheduling. English and Math testing must be done at certain times of the year. Resources for testing and test scoring require hundreds of person-hours, involving almost every staff person in the school in one way or another. Consequently, you often hear the comment that school personnel cannot "deal with anyone during testing week."

- *Organizational barriers***:** Much of the discussion for promoting collaboration has come in the context of programming beyond the school day. The structure of schools, whether district- or building-wide, sometimes provides hurdles that hinder successful partnership development. Personnel issues may prevent staff from being willing or available for after-school activities. There may be requirements for school personnel that community organizations do not require of their staff that may hinder the growth of the partnership.

- *Structure:* Schools generally have a more formal structure than community organizations. Hierarchical issues such as supervisory staff, credentials, issues of tenure, and purview of responsibility are much more rigid in a school and determined legally by union contracts. This can cause decision making to happen at a pace slower than community groups, and involve those who are not immediately involved in the collaboration, making the process confusing for those outside the system.

- *Mutual understanding of resources***:** Schools and community organizations often perceive each other as "competing" over the students. Schools may not understand how the work of an organization can help students improve academically. Community organizations may not understand how to work within the rigid structure of the school, and feel the school is "keeping them out." Community service providers may see the school as solely focused on academic skills and not addressing important personal, social/ emotional needs.

These are some of the biggest challenges to successful school/community collaboration. But there are ways to overcome these issues, and there are very successful collaborations that have made an impact on the academic and youth development issues that both school and community groups are committed to supporting.

Overcoming challenges:

- *"Getting to know you":* As in any situation, the first part of social interaction is for two parties to become acquainted. Reaching out to learn more about each other's functions is critical to understanding how resources can be combined and strengthened to better serve youth. Successful partnerships are composed of school administrators who view the schools not as separated from, but as part of the larger community. They strive to understand the families, businesses, community groups, and faith-based groups that make up the entire community. Community providers should attend school functions, learn about the academic standing (and pressure) of the school they want to work with, and learn the key personnel with whom they must work to successfully implement plans. This provides the community practitioner knowledge to answer the question, "As a community service provider what can you do to maximize students' test scores?"

- *A clear road map***:** Many new collaborations between schools and community providers are being driven by funding opportunities, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Center grants. These require formal partnership agreements which state each party's commitment and responsibility within the collaboration, in

order to enhance accountability and the chances of successful programming.

- *Communication:* The formal partnership agreement puts it all down theoretically, but when it is operationalized in "the real world" there are bound to be some hurdles. Are both parties feeling valued? Are communication channels open to discuss those hurdles? Are there ways to mutually deal with complications, as well as communicate success along the way? Are there regularly scheduled meetings to measure progress of the initiative?

- *Market the success***:** Every day millions of good things are happening with our youth through successful collaborations between schools and communities. The one thing that often gets left behind, or is seen as "icing" is the opportunity to share those successes. Spreading the word of these successes beyond the walls of the school and beyond the offices of the community groups can help build future successful initiatives. Collecting the data that shows positive results can be used to garner further resources, whether financial or an expanded network of collaborators. Each of the partners often has different avenues by which they spotlight their achievements. As a result of collaboration, each partner receives marketing in an area where they might never have received exposure before. A community group may never have had the opportunity to present at a state education department function, and schools may not have had the opportunity to share their successes at a statewide youth bureau conference.

Do these strategies actually work in the real world? Two examples of successful partnerships that have implemented the above strategies to overcome barriers are illustrated below.

The *"Come On Back"* program, based in Utica, New York, reconnects students with high absentee rates with their schools, working to improve attendance rates. The community group, Youth and Family Connections, partnered with the high school and working with principals and guidance counselors, developed an extended school day program. The program includes academic, career planning and recreational activities. Through collaborative efforts, the school provides teachers and counselors to assist with academic endeavors and Youth and Family Connections provides recreational space and connections to other community groups to enhance the opportunities available through the program. There is a clear understanding of responsibility, and regular meetings are held for on-going program review. Documented results demonstrate its early success. Of the participants, 86% improved their grade level scores in English, and 57% improved math scores. Not one student reported a decrease in scores. Teachers and students reported an improved connection to school for those students who participated, with 97% reporting improved behavior and improved attendance. This program has been highlighted at statewide education meetings, and has been the impetus for leveraging funding for other collaborative efforts to enhance positive youth development efforts for the Utica community.

Tips for Successful Collaboration

Schools:

- Become familiar with the organizations that exist in the home community of your school. Who are they? What do they do? How can they help your students and staff?

- Invite community groups to participate in or co-sponsor school events. The sense of shared responsibility and success can help build lasting relationships.

- Recruit community organizations to be providers of school district trainings. The specialized expertise of community organizations can provide a wealth of professional development opportunities for your staff.

- Offer school space for community events.

- Include community groups in electronic mailing lists to inform them of school events. Keep your neighbors abreast of school events.

Community Groups:

- Learn about the mandates under which schools must operate so that you can better demonstrate how the collaboration will benefit students.

- Attend school meetings. Board meetings are open to the public and can help you gain a solid understanding of issues facing the school.

- Establish relationships with specific key contact people within the school. Do you need to speak with the principal, or is the school social worker the person who most needs access to your services?

- Contact the district office to find out the schedule for formal staff training dates. Schools are often looking to fill a wide variety of content areas.

- Put all of the schools (personalized by key contacts) on your mailing list to keep them informed of your activities.

City Heights Educational Collaborative: This partnership is comprised of the San Diego Unified School District (Elementary, Middle and High School), three community partners and a higher education partner. In order to ensure that all partners are equally committed and enthusiastic about working together to improve the poor achievement status of this district, they spent six months holding public information forums to inform parents, teachers, and other community groups as to what the collaborative hopes to achieve and the methodology to achieve it. This partnership also spends a significant amount of effort ensuring that the authority and governance structure is acceptable to all parties, including the collective bargaining agreement of the school. They have been able to organize a Policy Board and hire an Executive Director who interfaces with all partners in the collaborative, making sure they have input and feel valued. The work of this collaborative has also shown tremendous success in improving achievement scores: the elementary school target for annual improvement was 17 points - in actuality, they documented an improvement of 82 points. The community groups and businesses involved in the partnership have all expressed pride in being part of the collaborative, as well as a new excitement for the youth of the community. The school continues to recruit and retain teachers who are excited to be part of the collaborative.

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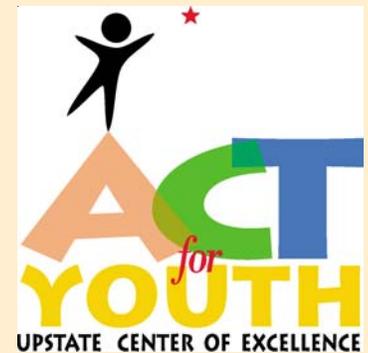
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