



# **Collaborations of Schools and Social Service Agencies**

Author

Jan Moore, Assistant Program Specialist

**National Center for Homeless Education**

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**Interagency collaboration is  
rarer than we think,  
harder than we think,  
and  
more promising than we think.**

(Adkins, Awsumb, Noblit, & Richards, 1999)

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## NCHE Profile



The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is a national resource center of research and information enabling communities to successfully address the needs of children and their families who are experiencing homelessness and unaccompanied youth in homeless situations. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, NCHE provides services to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for homeless children and youth in our nation's school communities. NCHE is housed at SERVE, a consortium of education organizations associated with the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

The goals of NCHE are the following:

- Disseminate important resource and referral information related to the complex issues surrounding the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness.
- Provide rapid-response referral information
- Foster collaboration among various organizations with interests in addressing the needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness
- Synthesize and apply existing research and guide the research agenda to expand the knowledge base on the education of homeless children and families, and unaccompanied youth

Website: [www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)

HelpLine: 800-308-2145

Contact: Diana Bowman, Director  
NCHE at SERVE  
P.O. Box 5367  
Greensboro, NC 27435

Phone: 336-315-7453 or 800-755-3277

Email: [dbowman@serve.org](mailto:dbowman@serve.org) or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org)

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## **Executive Summary**

In the past two decades, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of homeless students enrolled in US schools. Overwhelmed school personnel lack adequate resources and skills to successfully address the myriad of challenges – especially those outside the scope of academics – faced by homeless children. Issues like hunger, inadequate housing, poor health care, emotional difficulties, domestic violence, and family substance abuse among others have prompted educators to look increasingly toward collaborations with social service agencies as a possible solution.

A review of the literature reveals that little effort has been expended in identifying successful collaborative efforts and the few programs that have been identified have received so little attention that they have not been replicated by others initiating their own collaborative efforts. Educators and social service agencies receptive to beginning a collaborative effort would greatly benefit from an opportunity to study other programs and practices before embarking their own.

This report explores collaborative efforts of schools and social service agencies working with homeless children and families. The project's goals were to identify frequently encountered barriers and successful strategies to overcome them. This included examining specific programs and practices that could be adapted effectively for use in similar settings by school-level educators, local homeless liaisons, state homeless coordinators, social service workers, and other personnel who work in any capacity with homeless students.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades there has been a dramatic rise in the number of homeless students enrolled in American schools. (Tucker, 1999). From 1997 to 2000, the overall population of pre K-12 children increased only 2 percent, but the number of homeless pre K-12 children and youth increased 10 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Although it is difficult to identify those who do not want to be identified, estimates are that between 900,000 and 1.4 million children are homeless with their families (Burt, 2001) and children are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population (Durham, 2004; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2001).

The instability and chaotic nature of homelessness can have profound effects on a child's physical health, psychological development, and academic achievement. Physically, there are much higher rates of acute and chronic health problems, hunger and poor nutrition, and developmental delays (Thompson, 1998; Duffield, Heybach, and Julianelle, 2002). Psychological symptoms include depression, anxiety, conduct disorders (MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999; Thompson, Pollio, Constantine, Reid, & Nebbitt, 2002) and post-traumatic stress (Cauce, Paradise, Ginzler, Embry, Morgan, Lohr, et al., 2000). Achieving their educational potential is difficult for homeless children as they are twice as likely to repeat a grade or be suspended from school, and many attend three or more different schools in a year (Better Homes Fund, 1999). Of the one third that missed more than 10 school days, a fourth missed a month or more (Holloway, 2002/2003).

The problems associated with homelessness are so multidimensional, that researchers and practitioners overwhelmingly agree that no single agency has the ability to address all the issues faced by homeless students and their families (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Stronge, 1997; Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000; Tourse & Mooney, 1999). Successful efforts to address the issues can only stem from a broad, comprehensive approach based on the collaborative efforts of educators and various service providers working together (Bruner 1992; Hightower, Nathanson, & Wimberly, 1997; Tourse & Mooney, 1999; Tucker, 1999).

Descriptions of collaborations range from phone calls between acquaintances in different agencies to very organized and regulated cross-agency task forces (Noblit, 1999). Collaborators, defined as those working together and sharing responsibilities to achieve common goals must understand the interdependent relationships among students, families, and service providers (Lawson & Barkdull, 2000). Collaborating is not the goal but the means to accomplish the goal (Noblit, Richards, & Adkins, 1999). Understanding this important concept helps to place the focus on the children and families instead of the collaborative process.

In 2002, Stronge and Reed-Victor reported there was an abundance of potential and promising collaborative partners, but few organizations had actually begun implementing their collaboration efforts. That same year, the most recent reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (P.L. 100-77) not only required that states and schools be more responsible for getting homeless children into school and keeping better track of their academic performance, it also mandated that state coordinators and local liaisons for homeless education collaborate with other agencies to serve homeless students. It is clear that social, emotional, and physical issues are barriers to student success and must be addressed if schools are to meet their mandated goals (Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997; Taylor & Adelman, 1996). Therefore, a vast array of start-up collaborations involving schools and social service agencies has sprung up in the last few years.

Schools were not intended to address the multitude of economic, educational, and personal obstacles faced by homeless children. As Lawson and Briar-Lawson (1997) state, “Our schools were designed to help children learn, not to substitute for a healthy family and a supportive neighborhood community” (p. 8). Nevertheless, since schools are a “universal institution” (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1992, p. 23) and possibly the only stable influence in the life of a homeless child, school staff may be the most logical ones to spearhead collaborative efforts. Many communities are now focusing on schools as the basis for collaborations simply because that is where the children are.

Even though schools do not necessarily need to organize the collaborative services, the facility or administration’s cooperation is essential to the success of the effort. Melaville and Blank (1993) advise that the following be considered when trying to determine whether to base collaborative services in a school:

- Level of parental trust of and relationship with the school
- Immediate access to services during school hours
- Relationships among school and agency staff members
- Amount of available space
- Accessibility for parents and children
- Facility regulations

If there are situations where parents do not feel connected to the neighborhood schools, e.g., due to school district busing mandates, school consolidation, etc., services should be located where it is most convenient for the families to access them (Adkins, A., Awsumb, C., Noblit, G., Richards, P., 1999). For any of the previously mentioned reasons or for a myriad of others, the school may not be the best site. Whatever location is chosen must be convenient and comfortable for those who will utilize the services.

## **Findings**

Children and youth in homeless situations encounter challenges at school, within the family, and in the community. They often need to access services provided by several different systems, each with its own requirements, policies, procedures, and goals. In addition, each of these systems typically focuses on one set of needs (Long, 2004). The diversity of focus and professional knowledge among many systems can lead to radically different views of the youth and the services needed. For example, a child welfare social worker might focus on issues related to a child's safety, a school counselor could be more concerned with addressing behaviors at school, and a mental health professional would see a troubled youth in need of mental health services. Meanwhile, none of them considers how to improve overall outcomes for a child involved with multiple agencies (Dunkle & Nash, 1989; Luongo, 2000). So without agency collaboration, a youth may bounce haphazardly among agencies that provide services which may be duplicated or possibly even contradictory. The challenge for collaboratives is to provide more effective, comprehensive services thereby increasing the efficiency of all the agencies involved.

Plainly, serving children and youth in homeless situations is a community issue, not just a school or social service provider issue. Those who understand this have begun to form successful collaborative networks to provide comprehensive assistance in meeting the multiple needs of these children and their families. However, despite the general consensus that collaboratives hold great promise (Rafferty, 1997; Stronge, 1995; Sullivan & Sugarman, 1996), few efforts have been aimed at identifying the successful ones. Howell (2004) concludes that despite the conglomeration of uncoordinated initiatives, programs, and perspectives that pervades the youth services field, the few programs that have been identified have received so little attention that they have not been replicated in other locations. Educators and others, receptive to beginning a collaborative effort, would greatly benefit from opportunities to examine a variety of programs and practices before embarking on their own. Unfortunately, far more research is needed to determine how successfully collaborative services are provided and what impact they have on homeless children and youth.

## **Requirements for successful collaboration**

Interagency collaboration has been described as rarer than we think, harder than we think, and more promising than we think (Adkins, Awsumb, Noblit, & Richards, 1999). While collaborating is becoming more popular, it still requires hard work. But that work often pays off in an initial victory toward short-term goals which then acts as a catalyst toward pursuing more difficult and long-term tasks.

Some basic requirements for successful collaboration include agreeing on a common goal, assessing needs and resources, identifying priorities based on those needs, and

developing a mutually agreed upon strategic plan (Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000). An important first step is identifying the common thread that can weave participants together. Without a strong unifying goal and a clear, solid plan to achieve it, the collaboration will struggle to survive. But, building a broad community-based collaboration around a narrow focus will greatly increase the chances of success. If everyone is committed to the collective mission, the group is far more likely to survive the inevitable obstacles without falling apart.

- Suggestions for starting a collaboration:**
- Don't shortcut the planning process
  - Conduct a needs assessment
  - Base relationships on common goals, trust, and respect
  - Learn all you can about the other agencies involved
  - Establish a clear, concise mission, vision, and goals
  - Encourage passionate leaders
  - Develop plans to share information, resources, and authority
  - Set a pattern of frequent and unambiguous communication
  - Have clear expectations of agency representatives and volunteers
  - Encourage creativity and allow risk-taking

The right people must be at the table, flexible in searching for solutions, willing to understand the other agencies involved, and committed to do “whatever it takes” (Doerre & Mihaly, 1996, p. 42) to meet families’ needs. When it’s time to invite others to participate, some think it’s best to invite more versus less people because it’s difficult to get buy-in after the collaboration’s begun. They advise to be sure and include those from the population you want to serve. Involving homeless parents empowers them to take more responsibility in problem solving. Diverse participants generate new perspectives and creative solutions. On the other hand, a multitude of service providers do not necessarily guarantee better results. Caseworkers expected to consider a greater number of referral alternatives may feel even more burdened and choose to work only with a small group thereby hindering collaboration.

Key players must learn to work together and trust each other enough to be able to share information, resources, and decision-making authority. Successful collaborators should plan to spend as much time nurturing relationships as planning and implementing projects. Developing relationships, facilitating coordination among members, building creative partnerships, and uniting around common goals could win the support of unlikely allies (Action Alliance for Children, n.d.) and create new service possibilities that would be impossible for individual agencies. This will surely improve schools, strengthen families and neighborhoods,

and lead to “a marked reduction in young people’s problems” (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2004, p. 97).

No agency or organization can be truly effective if everyone works in isolation, but those asked to collaborate must feel they have a lot to gain by working together and that their efforts will be effective. True collaboration involves more than just meeting and talking; it must include adequate training, support, and authority and produce effective programs and services. Members grow more committed when they know their voices will be heard and their opinions valued. Without member buy-in, collaborative work will come to a standstill (Adelman & Taylor, 1998).

Communication is an ongoing challenge that must be addressed across every level of the participating agencies. Everyone must hear the same message and understand what it means to the group as a whole, not just their own agency. They must have regular contact (Hightower, Nathanson, and Wimberly, 1997) including specific discussions about a child’s life both within and outside of the school (Adkins, et al., 1999) all the while practicing patience and perseverance (Awsumb, 1999). Many problems occur because of semantics, so if something is said that doesn’t sound right, members must take the initiative to ask for clarification

Some believe that perceptions are the predominant factor that most often affect the success or failure of a collaboration. Perceptions include how agencies view one another, what each thinks is the right way to do things, and what each believes about the importance of serving clients well. Perceptions can be changed through cross-agency experience and open dialogue about collaboration. Only a group of people that values and encourages good communication, creativity, and risk-taking can foster an environment conducive to successful collaboration (Noblit, Richards, & Adkins, 1999).

Since many educational and social service agencies may choose to work together on a state level, the following are some specific recommendations for those state-level collaborations (Noblit, Richards, & Adkins 1999):

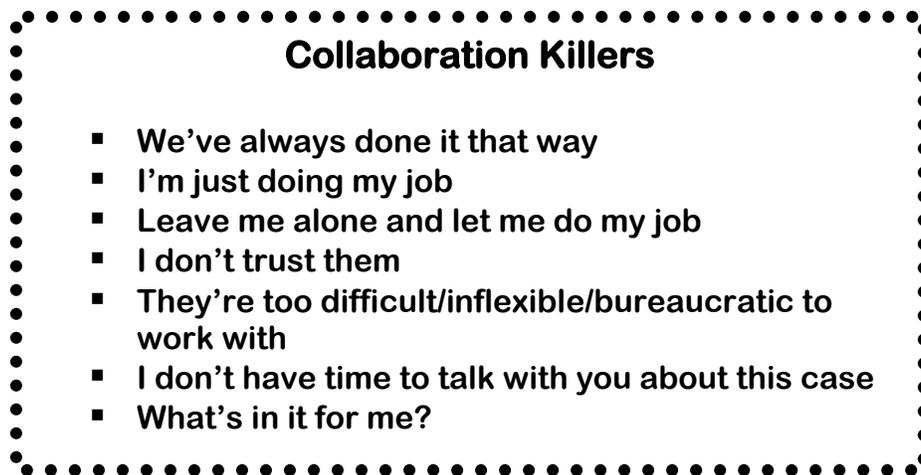
- Review policies and be clear about the priority of the collaborative effort
- Educate and train staff
- Revise goals based on client needs
- Create and cultivate relationships with community agencies
- Share successes with communities across the state to create continuous learning opportunities
- Ask local groups to identify areas where state policies conflict with or create barriers to implementing local policies

## **Barriers to collaboration**

Former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders explained collaboration as “an unnatural act between non-consenting adults. We all say we want to collaborate, but what we really mean is that we want to continue doing things as we have always done them while others change to fit what we are doing” (Human Interaction Research Institute, 2004). The most common explanations that educators and social service providers offer for not attempting to work collaboratively center around the inflexible bureaucratic structure of their institutions or as Dr. Elders put it “continuing to do things as we have always done them” (id).

Unfortunately, the needs of homeless children are so pressing that those who work in this arena often do not have the time or energy to establish collaborations. It is simpler to respond with resources that are convenient although inadequate than spend the time and effort required to work with another bureaucracy (Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000). Staff members from schools, school districts, and community agencies are hesitant to collaborate with those outside their own walls due to “administrative burdens and turf questions” (Verstegen, 1996, p. 285). They have different foci that have caused past difficulty in working relationships and few mechanisms exist to support successful collaboration between the two systems (Altshuler, 2003).

Educators often prefer to deal with problems inside the school walls instead of referring students to other professionals. This practice coupled with their lack of time for meetings and a failure to effectively communicate leads other service providers, students, and parents to view schools as closed systems (Noblit, Richards, Adkins, Awsumb, 1999). Despite these obstacles, Adelman and Taylor (1997) say the ultimate plan should be total service integration involving the blended resources and shared governance of schools and social service entities, but they admit this is a long-term goal.



**Collaboration Killers**

- We've always done it that way
- I'm just doing my job
- Leave me alone and let me do my job
- I don't trust them
- They're too difficult/inflexible/bureaucratic to work with
- I don't have time to talk with you about this case
- What's in it for me?

Because of the many systemic conflicts between schools and other agencies, current collaboration is primarily focused only on increasing communication, cooperation, and coordination along with reallocating or relocating resources. For true integration of school and community resources to occur, federal, state, and local entities must redefine their policies as well as their focus and scope of operation. For example, sharing information in compliance with privacy laws is often a challenge. One collaborative group created Parent Release Forms to specifically address how information on each issue could be shared and with whom. In another city, a judge issued an order that gave local agencies the authority to share pertinent information. One situation to consider is the role of teachers after the child has been referred to an outside agency. Many agencies have little contact with teachers although teachers may know the child's situation better than anyone else. It is clear that successfully overcoming barriers through school-community collaborative efforts will require fundamental systemic reforms in both schools and communities (Taylor & Adelman, 2000).

## **Promising Practices**

NCHE staff gathered information through interviews with educators and social service providers involved in collaborative efforts to provide education and other services to homeless children and their families. Most of these groups work in systems filled with service gaps and overlaps, bureaucratic obstacles, and ingrained, narrow-focused cultures. Despite these conditions, many positive outcomes were noted including:

- More effective processes
- More comprehensive services with fewer gaps and duplications in service provision
- Decreased isolation and competition among service providers
- Increased awareness and understanding of the needs of homeless students and their families among partners and in the community
- New opportunities that allowed families to have more stability and independence

The following is a description of each collaboration with some successful strategies and overall lessons learned. We conclude with a summary of the common findings that could guide others in effectively implementing collaborative efforts to serve homeless students and families.

The school districts involved in the study, all of which have McKinney-Vento subgrants, range in size from 4,200 to 103,000 students with between 75 and 1,094 students in each district identified as living in homeless situations. Regardless of the size of the district, each one collaborates with a large number of local organizations including non-profit, faith-based, public, and private agencies. These

include shelters, churches, housing authorities, homeless councils, city/county social service agencies, YMCA/YWCA, Goodwill, Salvation Army, law enforcement, and many others.

The collaborations were formally initiated between two and 16 years ago with all but one having an official memorandum of understanding. Even the collaboration that has been in effect for only two years is part of a larger group that has been meeting together for many years. Frequency of formal meetings is fairly evenly split with some held monthly and some quarterly. In addition to the formal meetings, members who work together closely communicate far more often, many on a daily basis, but most at least several times a week by phone or e-mail. A majority of the agencies share some portion of their funding.

Awsumb & McCadden (1999) reported a major breakthrough for one steering committee when it refocused on results instead of process. That change made the interdependency of the collaborating agencies quite clear and helped them realize that successful collaborative results could not be achieved with each agency viewing itself as working in a vacuum. They finally began to understand that their new focus would have to be on addressing the overall problem rather than on utilizing each agency's particular program.

As collaborators begin concentrating on results over processes, they may find it useful to ask overarching questions like "What would best prepare youth to become satisfied and productive members of the community?" or "What will it take to make students lives most fulfilling and successful?" Without collaboration, each agency provides the services it was designed to provide. Agreeing to focus collaborative effort on providing services that are in the child's best interest rather than on what a particular agency is designed to provide is a necessary basis for any effective collaboration. While it is important to have common goals, agencies should also remain flexible in the process used to achieve those goals.

There's no doubt that successful collaboration is difficult to accomplish. It requires not only pre-planning but constant monitoring as the collaborative matures. Unfortunately, there seems to be no one size fits all pattern of collaboration. A collaborative group must examine each member's organizational capabilities to determine the overall goal. They must also be flexible and creative enough to choose the right bits and pieces from other collaboratives to emulate and fuse them in the right combination to create their own opportunity for success. What leads to a very successful collaborative effort in one situation may not be at all useful in a different situation. Ideas, suggestions, and processes gleaned from other sources should be viewed not as a recipe for the perfect collaboration but to spark discussions centered on each group's own circumstances. The great challenge is to create a system of collaboration around their unique combination of skills that can serve homeless children in a way that meets their specific needs and moves their families toward self-sufficiency.

## **Perspectives and the St. Louis Park, MN School District**

Perspectives, a St. Louis Park, MN non-profit agency, has served at-risk and homeless children since 1991. It offers an after-school program with academic, social, and nutritional components and a supportive housing program that accommodates 60 of the 75 students designated as homeless by the school district. Seven years ago, Perspectives' staff, recognizing the importance of education and desiring to provide educational assistance to homeless students, approached the St. Louis Park School District and proposed a collaborative effort. The two entities jointly wrote a proposal for a McKinney-Vento subgrant, and then invited public, private, non-profit, and faith-based social service agencies to partner with them. Those involved in health, housing, transportation, community education, the Parks & Recreation Department, and the Police Department were asked to join the collaboration effort by helping with a variety of needs. Within the school district, the Title I Coordinator and the Homeless Liaison were key participants along with principals, teachers, and adjunct staff.

The McKinney-Vento subgrant was awarded to the school district. Super Target provides financial support and General Mills supplies financial and volunteer support. The county social service agency provides funding but is not involved in the collaboration. Over the years, several collaborators have lost funding, so partners have had to enlist community support to provide resources or volunteers to replace paid staff. A paid volunteer coordinator now recruits interns and volunteers.

According to liaison, Susan Myers, Perspectives staff members arrange and host formal meetings with subgroups that are scheduled either weekly or bi-weekly. Typical meetings include a short review of past actions but are more focused on developing plans for future action. Each participant is expected to contribute by identifying gaps in service areas, discussing which needs to address, and proposing possible next steps. The entire group rarely has an opportunity to meet together and collaborators would prefer having more meetings to get everyone at the table. In lieu of that, each Perspectives staff person is assigned an agency they are responsible to keep in the communication loop, i.e., one staff member works with Second Harvest, one with schools, one with transportation, etc.

Sharing information in compliance with privacy laws was a particular challenge. Everyone had to learn who could share what information (immunizations, attendance reports, individual education plans, conversations with teachers and staff, etc.). Parent Release Forms were created to specifically address how information on each issue could be shared.

The group has learned that collaboration is a necessity. They have found that although it is challenging to keep everyone on the same page, it is the best way to serve the children and the only way to provide all the resources necessary to meet the variety of needs presented by homeless children and their families.

## **Homeless Student Project Task Force of Lancaster, PA**

Ken Marzinko had bachelor's degree in secondary education but didn't want to teach, so he worked with the Children and Youth Agency (county child welfare) in Lancaster, PA. While pursuing his MSW degree, he wrote a paper on teen suicide and was introduced to the School District of Lancaster's Homeless Student Project (HSP), which had been operating for about three years. Intrigued with the organization, he asked to be notified when a social worker position came open there. A couple months later, he got the call, applied for, and accepted the school social worker position. Ken has chaired the HSP's task force the last 13 years. Currently, the HSP office that houses Ken and Becky Ortega Lita is in an elementary school with a 90% free and reduced lunch population and across the street from a large shelter with a health clinic where students can get their immunizations.

When the Pennsylvania State Department of Education began awarding subgrants, they encouraged districts to develop local community task forces. The school district initiated the efforts and invited agencies and shelters they already worked with to join a more formal group. There are currently 40 people on their mailing list and 20-25 of those attend the quarterly meetings. The HSP concentrates on working in community to accomplish creative problem solving, i.e., meeting with several agencies to discuss ways to help a 16 year old with no parental or a community support so he can remain in school.

As new social service agencies are created, they are invited to participate in the collaboration and encouraged to send new staff members – especially those who are unfamiliar with local resources – to task force meetings. The task force is responsible for planning meetings and setting the agenda with member input solicited for the next meeting's agenda. Also, members are given the opportunity to host a meeting in their agency. There is a waiting list of agencies desiring to host a meeting.

Sharing lunch always precedes the meeting and encourages informal conversation, which helps the task force meet one of its goals of familiarizing new people with local agencies and giving them opportunities to network. The task force is made up of agencies with very different responsibilities and members value the opportunity to get to know each other. All are expected to come, learn, and offer their expertise in problem solving. There is no competition; instead there's a true willingness to share resources to help homeless families. After the meeting, the host agency provides a tour of the facility explaining the services they offer and answering members' questions. Members are highly encouraged to develop relationships with those in collaborating agencies.

Shelters refer students directly to the HSP staff instead of the district's central enrollment office. School personnel know to call HSP because of working with them on prior cases or because of how they're listed in the district directory. Although the primary mission of HSG is to serve the educational needs of children, they also try to provide comprehensive services through referrals to other agencies. Therefore, they must know where to refer families to access other services such as housing, employment, etc. Agency members help each other out in special situations. For example, Ken recently called a shelter to try and place a homeless youth, but the shelter manager informed him she had no more beds. He offered to find a bed if she would squeeze it in the shelter. She agreed, so one more youth was taken off the street and provided a clean, safe place to stay.

Lancaster has lots of church, business, and community support in the form of cash and materials. Homeless children get funds for uniforms, bus passes, field trips, school pictures, etc. This has been going on for many years so there is a nest egg, which allows them to order items in bulk. Money is never given directly to families, but the agencies work with each other to provide needed items. For example, if a shelter discovers a student needs uniforms, the shelter will call HSP whose staff will then send the uniforms to the shelter or the school so they can dispense directly to the student.

Dental care, mental health, and housing are the biggest obstacles to providing comprehensive services although progress has been made by challenging the community agencies to work together to address these issues. It isn't the responsibility of the task force or any single agency to solve these problems, but the whole task force works together to find solutions. The collaborators have found that working together makes each person's job easier and every task force member gets something out of it. According to Marzinko, "No one person or agency working in isolation has the resources or expertise to deal with the complex problems we face. So, to better serve families we must all know how to connect with other agencies. "

The collaboration has gotten positive reports not only locally but also from state and national officials and politicians. Ken is frequently invited to talk about the task force to LEA representatives all over the state. Congressman Pitts and Senator Sturla regularly receive information gathered at task force meetings by their local representatives. Senator Sturla has also attended task force meetings, as have Pennsylvania State Coordinator of Homeless Education, Sheldon Winnick, and each of his supervisors all the way up to the state's Secretary of Education.

## **Children and Homelessness Collaborative – Glendale, CA**

As Carol Reynolds, the district liaison in the Glendale Unified School District in southern California, began implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act, she realized she needed a greater understanding of how other agencies operate and what issues they had with the school district. She also wanted an opportunity to form relationships that would make everyone's work easier. In order to accomplish this, the school district hosted a meeting of local agencies serving the homeless. The idea of forming a collaboration was discussed and agreed upon. Thus, the Children and Homeless Collaborative was implemented in August 2003 with the goal of enabling different agencies within the city to work together in serving homeless individuals and families. The collaborative, part of the Glendale Homeless Coalition which has been meeting for many years, includes Project ACHIEVE, Glendale YMCA and YWCA, Salvation Army, City of Glendale, Glendale Police Department, the Glendale Council PTA and individual PTA units, and departments within the school district who support homeless students.

Initially, members who have face-to-face contact with homeless families met monthly, but now meetings are held quarterly or more often if a specific need arises. The district convenes the meetings and acts as recorder. In between scheduled meetings, members communicate frequently by email. There is no memorandum of understanding so the agencies have no formal roles or responsibilities, nor do they share funding.

From both the school and shelter perspective, the primary barriers to collaboration pertained to student enrollment issues. To overcome these barriers, collaborative policy development was undertaken. In one situation, some school staff lacked enthusiasm when greeting new students from the shelter. To address this, a meeting was held for the shelter staff to get acquainted with the principals and enrollment staff of schools in the shelter district. Everyone had an opportunity to openly discuss any relevant issues that affected their shelter or school site. As a result of the dialogue, shelter staff agreed to call ahead and let the staff designee know when a new student was going to enroll. That allowed the designee to plan for the extra time it would take to complete the enrollment process. The group continues to develop awareness programs for district staff, attend school secretaries' meetings, visit individual schools, and meet with staff where there are identified problems with new student enrollment. Creating an atmosphere for open dialogue, examining situations from different perspectives, and having a willingness to change laid the groundwork for good collaboration among the agencies and helped facilitate the creation of a seamless enrollment process.

Another policy change started at the request of one of the school sites. The collaborative group created an Affidavit of Temporary Residence form for students living in housing where there is not a recorded address. This form was translated from English to the other primary languages in the district – Spanish, Armenian, and Korean. Another form was created explaining to parents the desire of school staff to check on a student’s wellbeing if the student stops attending school without withdrawing. A parent’s signature allows the shelter staff to tell school personnel whether the student is still living there if the school contacts them. (The shelter staff member does not tell the school staff person where the student moved, only that he/she no longer lives there.) This has helped the school sites determine enrollment status while avoiding breaches of confidentiality.

The primary focus of the Glendale Homeless Coalition is to have different agencies within the city work together to assist homeless individuals and families. Building on that focus, the Children and Homelessness Collaborative has not only increased community awareness about the needs of homeless students, they have also fostered a better understanding by the collaborative members of each other’s cultures leading to closer agency relationships and improved services for students and families.

## Coalition for the Homeless of Pasco County (FL)

Several years ago, the Coalition for the Homeless of Pasco County recognized a lack of affordable, transitional, and emergency housing as well as a need to disseminate information regarding available services for the homeless. Acknowledging that one agency could not provide all services needed, the Coalition began working on its HUD Continuum of Care that includes public, private, and faith-based agencies. It created a formal memorandum of understanding with shared funding among the agencies. Joanne Conger Huber, Pasco County's liaison for homeless education, says collaboration among the agencies has increased multifold resulting in many service gaps being filled.

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program has been a member of the Coalition the last six years collaborating with other agencies in providing services for homeless families. With the Coalition as the lead agency, direct administrative assistance from Pasco County, and active agency involvement from the Continuum of Care, a unified effort in assisting the homeless population has been established. The collaborative focuses on providing ongoing services for homeless families as well as specific projects such as the point-in-time homeless count and Memorial Day events which are targeted specifically at the homeless population. Each agency provides particular services as determined by their funding. EHCY is responsible for education including educating parents regarding resources available to assist their family.

“Developing relationships is imperative  
for effective collaboration.”

Joanne Conger Huber

Representatives from these collaborative agencies meet monthly but are in touch with each other at least weekly. Some of the currently involved agencies and their contributions are:

- Gulf Coast Community Care Shelter, Salvation Army Domestic Violence Shelter – now allow referrals from collaborators
- Head Start/Pre-K programs – prioritize homeless children
- Health Department – offers free school physicals
- Pasco County Social Services – developed a program to help families who are doubled up (the largest population served by the collaborative) with moving expenses
- Youth and Family Alternatives – developed a program to assist with child care

According to Ms. Huber, developing relationships with personnel from other agencies is imperative for effective collaboration and she stresses the importance of discussing how the collaboration will be a win-win situation for everyone involved. Her relationships with shelter staff were developed through on-site visitations on a regular, pre-determined schedule.

One barrier to the collaboration’s effective implementation was that some agency personnel did not feel comfortable sharing information. This was overcome by consistently working on the development of non-threatening relationships within the collaborative. Confidentiality was a concern at the domestic violence shelters, so a family release form was created to authorize the shelter to direct services to the family and EHCY to provide support and supplemental assistance.

Two particularly helpful lessons learned were to (1) know the agency personnel and present requests from their perspective and (2) be patient; developing relationships requires consistency over a period of time. The most positive outcomes are that agencies have learned to work together and now provide better and more comprehensive services to the homeless families.

**Win-Win Worksheet**

1. What do you want?
2. What is the other agency’s mission?
3. What does the other agency want?
4. How can you frame what you want to make it coincide with what the other agency wants?
5. What can you offer that will advance the collaborative’s mission?

## **Project HOPE of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (NC)**

Jerrilyn Johnson, a former guidance counselor, began her work in homeless education in 1996 in a part-time Project HOPE Case Manager position funded by a McKinney-Vento subgrant. After taking her current position as local homeless liaison for the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS), she discovered a tremendous need for additional funding, personal items, school supplies, data collection improvements, referral information, and more. Although Winston-Salem had an active Homeless Council that included many agencies, none dealt primarily with children or students. Desire to fill the needs of homeless children precipitated the development of the many collaborative services and activities now in place to assist these students and their families. According to Jerrilyn, “I spent the first year working out of my car, writing grants. I spent entire days in shelters to get the feel of what that experience is like.” This is how she learned the context and cultures of other organizations which is such an important part of successful collaborative efforts.

In 1997, a full-time caseworker position was funded through the McKinney-Vento subgrant. That same year, the City of Winston-Salem Housing / Neighborhood Development Department (H/ND) included Project HOPE in a HUD Continuum of Care grant proposal as “a supportive service” providing direct services to homeless students and their families. Funds from the HUD grant cover the case manager position, a teaching position, and some administrative funding.

“I spent the first year working out of my car, writing grants. I spent entire days in shelters to get the feel of what that experience is like.”

Jerrilyn Johnson

Joining the Winston-Salem Council for the Homeless (approximately 40 agencies) opened dialogue related to the needs of homeless children and their families and led to collaborative relationships with many of the other members. Jerrilyn also serves on the Goodwill (Industries) Community Council, a 30-member collaboration that provides enrichment, educational training, and extensive opportunities to the disenfranchised population in the community. Goodwill provides a store that assists with funding for training and provides education and training for homeless students.

Project HOPE staff members participate on many other councils, boards, and committees including the North Carolina Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs which hosts conferences and provides other support and information and the Teen Pregnancy Council which provides services for homeless youth who may be pregnant or parents. Past funding has been received from agencies as diverse as a charitable trust foundation, a local medical school, and Goodwill Industries.

A common barrier to successful collaboration is often simply that agencies are not familiar with each other's work. To overcome this, Project HOPE staff members meet with agencies to explain who they are and what services they can provide. They attend community meetings, festivals, etc. and distribute literature including Project HOPE pamphlets and the requirements of recent legislation related to homeless children and their families.

The most positive outcomes of all these collaborative relationships include:

- Establishing a system of support
- Working on a system of information sharing
- Exploring funding opportunities
- Increasing awareness of issues related to homeless students
- Providing a coordinated system of support for project hope

Jerrilyn's advice to those considering collaboration is:

- Learn all you can about the other agency (vision, mission, history, etc.)
- Know the role of the other agency in the relationship
- Provide clear goals and expectations for the relationship
- Agree to have open and honest dialogue

## Broward County Schools (FL)

Dianne Sepielli started working in homeless education for Broward County in 1991. In the last fourteen years, her program has partnered with agencies as diverse as the county government, YMCA, Salvation Army, children’s museum, NOVA University, Humana Foundation, Bank Atlantic, and FEMA. Each of these and many other collaborative efforts are based on Dianne’s networking plan which boils down to building relationships in the community. This is definitely not just a job for her; she says she never lets anyone get away without talking to them about homeless kids.

“Building relationships is the most important thing...We must get out and network; otherwise, homeless children are overlooked. They’re invisible until we bring it to the attention of the community.”

Dianne Sepielli

**Children’s Museum.** Homeless education folks usually go to other homeless service providers for help, but Dianne advises: “Think outside the box!” She is also in charge of the district’s character education program. Art teachers wanted to incorporate character education into their program, so Dianne met with the local children’s museum director to set that up. Then, because she never lets anyone get away without talking to them about homeless kids, she asked the director if they’d ever done anything with homeless kids. He agreed to consider it. The result was ArtREACH (Reconnecting and Educating homeless Adolescents through Creativity and Hope) the product of a collaboration among the museum, School Board of Broward County, and the Salvation Army.

“Think outside the box!”

Dianne Sepielli

What started as a program that included the museum staff visiting shelters a couple times a month has evolved into a well-respected after-school program. Homeless children are bused to the program based at the Salvation Army every day from 2 to 6 p.m. While there they rotate between three activities: homework assistance led by teachers from the school district, an arts-based curriculum, and recreation. The program also offers weekly counseling, and once a month the students visit the museum itself for more hands-on arts activities. This has not only

opened up a whole new world for the kids but also for the museum staff who had never had any contact with homeless children. The program has received a great deal of attention – even being featured in a Time Magazine article which spawned generous local matching support.

For families transitioning out of shelters, child care expenses are often enough to catapult them right back into a homeless situation. Utilizing a team approach to the problem, the county now provides 15 months of childcare after families leave the shelters. Recently, the commissioners added funds to cover four months rent and a security deposit for these families in transition. Dianne’s teamwork with the county commissioners has led the commissioners to seek her input before writing their annual strategic plan or addressing any other issue concerning homelessness.

Broward Coalition for the Homeless held monthly meetings attended by around 100 agency directors. When Dianne realized the information did not always filter down to the case managers in these agencies, she asked to meet with the case managers as a group. Initially, the discussions at those meetings centered on educational issues, but now discussions at those meetings are around a plethora of topics and include staffing issues with the families.

When Dianne met with a Senior Vice President of Bank Atlantic and explained the problems formerly homeless families have in buying their own houses, the bank initiated H2H (Homeless to Home) ownership enabling people to go from homeless to home ownership in 8-12 months.

## **Barriers to Collaboration**

Many years ago, Dianne’s first exposure to Florida’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) was while accompanying a client there and both felt that client service was an issue. Dianne called a contact at DCF that she’d met through another homeless coalition and offered to do some training if DCF would assign one person in each of their offices as a contact for the homeless. DCF leaders agreed. This didn’t circumvent the process; it just insured that the homeless would receive services like everyone else. Later, the same system was set up with the Broward County Family Assistance Centers (FAC). This highlights the opportunities liaisons have to help other agencies improve their systems and processes, i.e., cutting off benefits because people don’t respond to correspondence sent thru the mail.

Broward County now has an annual planning day to address homeless issues. They identify barriers and unmet needs and use creative problem solving to address them. This way they get input, and therefore buy-in, from the community. Once needs are determined, the county can write requests for proposals that require addressing these particular issues.

## HEART Program, Spokane (WA) Public Schools

About 16 years ago, homeless parents in Spokane, WA, expecting to be in shelters a very short time, often decided not to enroll their children in the neighborhood schools. It was long before the McKinney-Vento legislation, and homeless children were not allowed to continue at their school of origin, so parents chose to wait until they moved into more permanent housing. Unfortunately, families were frequently in shelters far longer than they had anticipated which meant their children were out of school for weeks or even months at a time. In 1989, a collaborative effort among the Spokane Public Schools, the YWCA, and homeless shelters serving families with children created a separate school at the YWCA with an after-school program added later. Although lots of needed services were provided to the children, regrettably academics took a back seat and this led to a very high retention rate.

The collaborators recognized their responsibility to provide a quality academic atmosphere along with addressing other things such as housing, medical, and clothing issues. A task force was convened to create a new vision for the program. The task force included representatives of the school district, YWCA, three universities, shelters, school board, and the city human services agency, along with the three teachers from the school. The HEART (Homeless Education and Resource Team) program was created. A segregated school model no longer seemed the best solution, so an integrated support model was created to re-focus on education. The attitude is now that the children are the responsibility of the school district. According to Edie Sims, Spokane's district liaison for homeless education, "We are educators. We can provide lots of other services but we have failed the kids unless they receive a quality education. These are school children who are temporarily homeless. The program is a support to the school. They are not 'our kids'; they are the school district's kids. Calling them 'my kids' takes away the district's responsibility."

"We are educators. We can provide lots of other services, but we have failed the kids unless they receive a quality education. These are school children who are temporarily homeless. The program is a support to the school. They are not 'our kids'; they are the school district's kids. Calling them 'my kids' takes away the district's responsibility."

Edie Sims

Many of Spokane's family situations confirmed research which says families often spend time doubled up before going into shelters. In the YWCA school, only kids from the shelters were served. When those students were integrated into neighborhood schools and school personnel were trained how to recognize the signs of homelessness, many more children were identified and served.

Make no mistake; collaboration was difficult both in 1999 when homeless students were integrated into neighborhood schools and at the end of the 2004-2005 school year when the HEART offices moved from the YWCA into a school district building. Barriers included people who did not want to change; agencies with different cultures, philosophies, and languages; and two conflicting definitions of homelessness – one from McKinney-Vento and one from HUD. But those involved helped each other work through the issues. The ones who did not want to change for personal reasons were challenged to focus on the children's best interest instead of their own desires. Because different agency cultures use various terms for the same concept, partners had to "learn the language" of the other agencies - a necessary step for successful communication any time representatives from different organizations work together. HUD and McKinney-Vento use different definitions of homelessness, so it was decided that data could not be accurately combined. Now each agency keeps its own records. They also had to give themselves and each other permission to make mistakes while allowing the collaborative to evolve.

The collaborators laid down the following ground rules which became key to their success:

- Remember that each partner is focused on doing what's best for the kids; find a way to trust and honor each other.
- Communicate clearly. Problems often occur because of semantics, so if something is said that doesn't sound right, ask for clarification.
- Appreciate and celebrate what's been done in the past, but recognize that we must move forward.

They also agreed that their work was about education which made it a community issue – far more than just community awareness. Edie reports some valuable lessons that came out of the experience for school districts collaborating with other agencies to better serve homeless children and families are:

- Collaboration is hard but absolutely necessary, and it is worth the effort.
- Confidentiality is a must.
- Be the one who believes the glass is half full.
- It is always about children and families; don't lose sight of that.
- Each collaborative must have a mission statement for the program and each part of the program.
- Homeless education programs support the school district's efforts to serve children; they are not "our kids"; the whole school district must take responsibility for serving them.

- Educators can ensure the kids get lots of other services, but have failed unless the students receive a quality education.
- Nonprofits are competitive for funds, so they must compete for the positive publicity that will help garner those funds. When working with them, be sensitive to their organizations' interests.
- When approaching possible supporters, remember to ask for referrals to others who might help with funding.
- Identify the needs of the families and search out diverse ways to fill those needs – universities, retired teachers, sewing circle clubs, etc.
- Local liaisons must become knowledgeable by spending time on the web, searching data, and watching for trends. Knowing facts and figures can help counter the misconceptions people have.

Share personal stories of the kids. For example, explain that many unaccompanied youth couch surf because of difficult family situations not because they don't want to be in school. Talk about how your program helps them succeed in school, graduate, and attend college.

**Tips for new liaisons:**

- **Network, network, network!**
- **Tell people who you are and what you do. Educate them about identifying and serving homeless children and youth.**
- **Join the local homeless coalition and HUD Continuum of Care to gain a broader view of homeless issues and share issues specific to homeless students and their families.**
- **Develop collaborative working relationships with other homeless service providers such as the county/state human service agencies, shelters, YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Goodwill, etc. Don't forget those in your own school district – migrant education, Title I, special education, transportation, guidance counselors, school social workers and nurses, those who work with dropout prevention, before- and after-school and mentoring programs, etc.**
- **Remember, people want to help so give them concrete ideas about where and how they can get involved.**
- **Inform the people who answer the phone for the district office so they know where to refer questions, volunteers, and donors.**
- **Think outside the box!**

## Tennessee

Hamilton County, Tennessee is the home of a problem-based collaborative. A large number of students were losing credits when they transferred between schools on a block system and those on a regular system. This led to behavioral problems and an increased dropout rate. Central to the issue was the district's reliance on contract agencies to transport children in the custody of the Department of Children's Services (DCS).

Lois Rhea, Educational Consultant for DCS, had worked with all the agencies involved but they had not worked with each other, so she arranged and facilitated a meeting allowing all the parties to discuss the issues. Those who attended included representatives from the Hamilton County schools, DCS, contract agencies, local homeless coalition, and the community. They all voiced their concerns and goals and resolved to look at the issues from the other participants' perspectives and to keep their focus on acting in the best interest of the children. One result of the meeting was the decision to only allow students to be moved either within the same school zone or between grading periods. This insured that students would not lose credits when they changed schools.

The results for the students were less frustration and therefore fewer behavior problems. Those involved in the meeting were pleasantly surprised by the progress they made. Because relationships were formed as this problem was solved, the group is now able to tackle bigger issues. According to Lois, "Once they tasted success, it provided the impetus to go on and do more."

Janice Routon, Tennessee State Coordinator for Homeless Education and Susan Mee, Senior Counsel for Education Issues at the Tennessee DCS, who have collaborated on many issues, agree on the following:

### Marks of Good Collaborations:

- Open, comfortable communication.
- Common goal of focusing on the best interest of the kids, not pointing fingers at each other or advocating for a particular agency.
- Participants understand there is a mutual benefit to transparency in their relationships.
- Because everyone is busy, there will be interruptions and lapses in the work, but that does not have to result in loss of momentum.

### Recommended Strategies

- Ask for clarification about foggy areas.
- Deal with people openly and honestly.
- Acknowledge and work on the trust factor.
- Provide a safe environment for people to hash out issues/problems and ask questions.

## **San Antonio (TX) ISD Transitions Program**

Bexar County, Texas has 17 different school districts located in the metro San Antonio area. Estella Garza is the liaison for the inner city district, San Antonio ISD. Five years ago, her district along with two others, were the only ones in the county with McKinney-Vento subgrants. She and the other two liaisons in districts with subgrants realized that families often bounced around among the 17 districts, so the three of them decided to try and work with all the districts' liaisons. The three included two with MSW degrees and one with a background in education. Even among these three, there was a steep learning curve concerning sensitivity to homeless children and families.

Their efforts to educate not only school district personnel but also the community led them to create the Homeless Education Council. They set goals, created a mission statement, and initially invited those who had written letters of support for their subgrant proposals to join the council. They trained their supporters about student homelessness and issues concerning service providers connecting with the school district. Over the first three years, the liaisons met twice a month – once to create a meeting agenda and then with the group as a whole. In between meetings, they called each other when kids moved to make referrals for services, etc. They offered to allow the students to stay in their school of origin but could not offer transportation. (This was before McKinney-Vento required transportation be provided.)

During this time, one of the liaisons was on the board of the local homeless coalition and one was on the HUD Continuum of Care. Both were pushing their respective groups to pay more attention to children's issues, and both felt they made headway. Now both groups have more activities that cater to children, look more closely at issues concerning doubled up families, and are more aware of educational issues that affect homeless students.

Despite two more districts in the county receiving subgrants, participation on the HEC has dropped. Last year only six of 17 districts reported the numbers of homeless students in their district. Garza cites all sorts of barriers that impact whether the numbers are reported by the district. Districts have different methods of identifying homeless students. Not all districts use a residency questionnaire and some have more shelters serving children than others. Also, some liaisons have other job duties leaving them less time to devote to homeless issues.

Some lessons learned include that a local liaison must:

- Have adequate communication skills to successfully enter any arena whether it's one-on-one conversations, formal trainings, or interactions in civic and community meetings
- Communicate in a professional way what he/she does and how it's done
- Be discerning enough to determine the systems where homeless kids can be identified and formulate a way to work with each of those systems
- Stay positive – be a glass half-full person

**Tips for more seasoned liaisons:**

- Think outside the box!
- If there's not a local homeless coalition in your area, start one by inviting local service providers, community leaders, business people, politicians, etc. to discuss issues and brainstorm solutions.
- Create new collaborative relationships with agencies outside the typical service provider realm, i.e., banks, museums, orchestras, universities, community/ neighborhood development, local businesses, medical, vision, and dental schools and practices, law enforcement, civic groups, chambers of commerce, restaurants, school clubs/organizations, newspapers, etc. and recognize that each brings a unique perspective to the issues.
- Agree to serve on boards of community, nonprofit, and other agencies that are supportive of homeless education.
- Share stories about the needs of homeless students with everyone you meet.

## Overall Lessons Learned

Although collaboration is difficult, the collaborators all agreed that it is absolutely necessary and, ultimately, working together to find solutions makes everyone's job easier. Keeping everyone on the same page is a challenge, but partnerships with diverse agencies (not just those typically involved with the homeless population) may be the only way to provide all the resources to meet the various needs of homeless children and their families.

Creating an atmosphere for open dialogue, examining situations from different perspectives, and having a willingness to change are foundational for developing positive relationships with personnel from other agencies - an imperative for effective collaboration. It is vital to know the other collaborative agencies and their staff members in order to create and maintain common focus, communicate effectively, problem solve creatively, and present requests from perspectives the other agency members understand.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for collaboration, so each collaborative group must examine its own unique situation to develop what works best. Building relationships requires consistency over time. Participants should understand there is a mutual benefit to transparency in their relationships, but everyone needs permission to make mistakes as the collaborative evolves. Members must be patient with themselves and each other as they work to build a safe environment for people to hash out issues and problems and to ask questions. Below are some ideas to consider as a collaboration takes shape:

- Only buy-in from all those involved will sustain the work.
- People will take part in what they help create, so establish the expectation that everyone will contribute.
- The common goal is focusing on the best interest of the kids, not pointing fingers at each other or advocating for a particular agency.
- Learn all you can about the other agencies (vision, mission, history, etc.) and understand their role in the collaborative.
- Provide clear goals and expectations for the relationships.
- Remember that each partner is focused on doing what's best for the kids; find a way to trust and honor each other.
- Nonprofits are competitive for funds, so they also compete for positive publicity that will help garner those funds. When working with them, be sensitive to their organizations' interests.

- Starting the collaboration with a small manageable project will build confidence to maintain momentum and undertake larger tasks.
- Secure a commitment from agency leaders to loosen their agency-specific regulations in order to meet client needs.
- Empower decision making authority within the collaborative instead of requiring each member to clear decisions through their agency channels.

Establishing honest and frank communication patterns is the basis of building trusting relationships. To ensure this:

- Agree to have open and honest dialogue. This is particularly important when defining problems, recognizing differences, and deciding the specifics of how to collaborate.
- Insist on strict confidentiality.
- Agencies have different languages, so communicate clearly. Problems often occur because of semantics; ask for clarification about anything that is unclear.
- Establish expectations and design procedures to enhance the frequency and level of communication.

Concentrating on the core vision instead of structures or processes helps collaboratives maintain focus on *what* they intend to accomplish instead of getting sidetracked by *how* they go about doing that. This opens opportunities for thinking outside the box and being creative in addressing issues and problems. It also helps the collaborative withstand changes in membership, organizational structure, etc. Each person and each agency will have their own priorities, but the collaborative must concentrate on the overall goal of the group: how to better serve children and families. To do this, collaborators advise:

- Begin with client issues and problems not preconceived solutions.
- Think outside the box; identify the needs of children and their families and search out diverse ways to fill those needs.
- Encourage participants to step back and question why things have always been done in a particular way. One of the principal stumbling blocks to successful collaboration is overcoming customs and habits.

- Take the initiative to address problems and find creative solutions; educators can ensure that the kids get lots of other services, but have failed them unless they receive a quality education.
- Involve the community to provide new perspectives on issues and problems and empower those receiving services to share responsibility for finding solutions.

Special advice for collaboratives seeking outside funding includes:

- Be knowledgeable. Spend time on the web, search data, and watch for trends. Know facts and figures so you can counter misconceptions people have.
- Be the one who believes the glass is half full.
- When approaching possible supporters, remember to ask for referrals to others who might help with funding.
- Share personal stories about the kids. Talk about how your program helps them succeed in school, graduate, attend college, etc.
- Clearly demonstrate to funding sources the value of working together.
- Be patient and persevere!

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