

Practical School Community Partnerships Leading to Successful Educational Leaders

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School leaders must have knowledge and understanding of the various external and internal entities in their school community. Partnerships, with a focus on communication and interaction with diverse community leaders and professionals, are essential for school success. In this article, the author discusses successful practical experiences and provides suggestions to enhance partnerships.

With the overpowering pressure of cutbacks in personnel, resources, and accountability to increase student test scores, one of the most neglected opportunities by a principal is that of developing school community partnerships. It is a given that a principal must develop a collaborative partnership with his/her parents and staff, but your external school environment encompasses a much larger scope of diverse community entities. Schools do not exist apart from the society to be served (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2011).

A DEFINITION OF SCHOOL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Even though the school may be within a community, schools may be strangely isolated from the businesses, agencies, senior centers, and other potentially helpful groups and individuals located in their community (Epstein, 2011).

Schools and principals who communicate with their external communities in some organized way enhance their chances of getting better public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of a community, and receiving many functional ideas and resources that will help educate students better. For many principals, any program of communicating with their external public is very limited or nonexistent. Bagin (2001) stated that principals who feel a need for an ongoing program usually limit it to parents or to some school-related group.

“A high-performing school requires broad-based community support and support that will come from communities that are well informed and well engaged in the educative processes that go on in the school” (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2011, p 302).

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Epstein (2011) suggested that many schools lacked an understanding of the resources available to support schools. “Many educators, families, and students are unaware of the resources in their communities. Indeed, many are unclear where their community begins and ends” (p.462). Schools exist within communities. A principal needs to be proactive in developing relationships with stakeholders throughout the community. One of the ways principals can prepare to learn more about the community is to create a community profile. This involves identifying resources within the neighborhood. Specifically, it would include the area around the school, home neighborhoods, and other locations where students, families, and teachers spend time and give or receive services. The list should include museums, zoos, higher education institutions, libraries, the media, business and industry, shops, youth organizations, places for child care, places of worship, and other locations where students and families visit, work, give or obtain services, learn, or play (Epstein, 2011, p. 462; Cunningham and Cordiero, 2009, p. 123).

School and community partnerships are built on relationships of trust and effective interpersonal communication. A review of the research revealed that successful school and community partnerships were created through leadership, trust, stability, readiness and sustained outreach (Auerbach, 2011; Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon & Simon 2005). Other key factors are reciprocity, where both partners benefit in some way, and the alignment and pooling of resources, so that there is no duplication but instead a filling of the gaps in service provision. The ultimate responsibility of the principal is to be proactive in knowing the community and establishing sustainable relationships.

Parents need to be connected to the school that their students attend. This type of partnership is one where the school is supportive of the parents’ responsibility to educate their children. In effective schools, there is a strong acknowledgement of parental rights regarding the education of their children. An important responsibility of principal and teacher alike is developing relationships with parents based on mutuality (Jeynes, 2010). The partnership concept calls for the free and continual exchange of information between parents and teachers and the involvement of parents in school affairs. It includes cooperative work on problems that affect students and advance the cause of education (Bagin, 2001).

The Parent and Teacher Association identified six standards involving parental involvement. These are: (a) creating schools where parents experience a sense of belonging and being welcomed; (b) communicating where parents know they are heard and understood while school personnel also are able to share and be understood through two-way interactions; (c) striving to ensure equity on behalf of each child’s right to learn and experience a safe and nurturing school environment; (d) Collaborating in school involvement regarding everything from policies to programs so that decision-making power is shared, and (e) connecting with community resources (National PTA).

Many states and districts have adopted policies and position statements that are research-based and comprehensive and that address school communities and partnerships. One such policy was adopted by the Connecticut State Board of Education (November 4, 2009):

School-family-community partnerships are:

1. A shared responsibility with schools and other community organizations committed to engaging families in meaningful, culturally respectful ways as well as families actively supporting the children’s learning and development;

2. Continuous across a student's life, beginning in infancy and extending through college and career preparation programs; and
3. Carried out everywhere that children learn including homes, early childhood education programs, schools, after-school programs, faith-based institutions, playgrounds, and community settings. (Espstein, 2011, p. 315)

The American public school began as an extension of the home and local community, through a specific delegation of power to each state. Because of this delegation, a partnership was created between parent, school and community around the school, necessitating the active interest and intelligent participation of all in the education program (Drake & Roe, 2003, p. 43)

Most researchers define community to imply people, relationships, and shared interests and values. This is much more personal than calling community an institution or system. Drake & Roe, (2003) define community as "a group of people conscious of a collective identity through common physical, cognitive and affective educational relationships" (p. 48). A school's community is comprised of all stakeholders. This includes businesses and agencies within the attendance boundaries of the school.

FOCUS ON THE COMMUNITY

In addition to the internal and local external communities previously mentioned, other external communities specifically addressed in this paper and the external communities are state and federal legislators serving your community, local civic and business leaders, health and social care agencies, law enforcement, chambers of commerce, community service groups such as Rotary, Lions, Optimist, Kiwanis, cultural and fraternal groups, religious and youth groups. A challenge that also is an opportunity in these community partnerships with organizations involves collaboration that results in friendly relationships. This is more likely to occur when the members of these groups know that the principal values their input regarding the school and local community.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF PROMOTING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The involvement of stakeholders benefits the school and the students attending that school. For example, members of service organizations, churches, and resource agencies want to make positive differences in the community. They want to support and help the school be successful. The time a principal invests in outreach to such stakeholders conveys that they are important in the life of the school and have something to contribute.

There are some excellent benefits that the principal could realize from these relationships and contacts, such as funds for bus transportation for field trips, resources for classrooms and libraries, classroom volunteers, guest speakers for career programs and equipment. In my experience as a principal, there were numerous examples of the generosity of community agencies. One example was when a local newspaper ceased operation and donated its photographic equipment and supplies to the school's photography department. Another example was a local district attorney's office. The personnel in the office created a large trust account from lawsuits where the decisions were favorable to the district attorney's

office. A portion from the financial settlements from this office was used to create a large trust account so that the dividends were used yearly to fund student scholarship. In another example a local business donated equipment, furniture, and carpeting to the school when it remodeled. These materials were used in the library, classrooms, and offices.

Through effective partnerships with neighbors surrounding the school, the principal can seek their assistance in monitoring the school in terms of possible vandalism when school is not in session. One of the ways for promoting this is to provide neighbors with a metallic refrigerator pad that has the district security office telephone number as well as the phone number to local law enforcement.

Students need to be attending school in terms of their learning and their safety because most parents assume their children are in school. Helping local fast food restaurants and other business that tend to attract students can result in personnel from these businesses reporting trancies or suspicious behavior. An example that happened when I was a principal was a student fleeing the campus after assaulting another student. This student, who also was in possession of a gun, was at a donut shop. The manager of the shop contacted both the school and the police. The police were successful in arresting the student.

PRINCIPAL ADVOCACY IN THE COMMUNITY

In the true sense of the word, to lobby is “to influence members of a lawmaking body in their vote” (World Book Dictionary, 1982, p. 1225). This work reveals the political nature associated with being a school administrator. Principals need to be advocates for students and the school. Highly visible principals who are involved actively in the community can lobby local government regarding educational issues.

PRINCIPAL ADVOCACY WITH STATE GOVERNMENT

A special report in the Pasadena Star-News detailed the fact that “lawmakers increasingly depend on lobbyists” (de Sa, p. 1) and the organizations they represent to decide on how to vote on certain issues. “Lawmakers generally partner with a sponsor such as an organization or corporation for most bills they propose. The partnership gives the legislator the support needed to push the law through the legislative process (de Sa, p 1, July 18, 2010).” Principals can reach out to lobbyists and directly to government officials on behalf of students, schools, and education.

Political activism is possible through membership in one’s professional organization. Every principal should belong to the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA). Through such membership, the professional organization grows and becomes more influential. ACSA, with a membership of approximately 16,000 school administrators, has served to advocate on behalf of principals and other educational administrators. This association currently maintains a lobbying staff of registered lobbyists to handle all of the policy and fiscal issues that impact preschool through adult education in California, in addition to maintaining a close liaison with all of the pertinent state boards and agencies, as well as frequently meeting with legislators and their staff. ACSA is the organization that principals call upon to promote their local educational issues through the legislative process.

Legislators, with the onset of term limits, depend on their staff members and lobbyists to provide them with information regarding issues and legislative bills. The most

knowledgeable professions regarding educational issues are those connected directly with schools and districts. Thus, lawmakers need to hear the voices of school principals on issues related to education. An educator does not have to be a professional lobbyist to influence his/her local political leader or legislator. Hopefully, after reading this article, principals will be anxious to advocate and lobby for their schools.

The principal can act as an individual in lobbying efforts, work through ACSA, and work through a variety of community contacts such as local businesses, community leaders and local politicians to be equally as important as legislators. Each person or company will generate an abundance of ways they can benefit your school. One-way and two-way communication is the key. First you need to identify the names of individuals who you wish to approach. District offices, the internet, professional organizations and community directories should provide you with the names and companies that are in your community and/or are your local district or civic representatives. Take part in advocacy/lobbying opportunities at the state and federal levels organized by your professional associations such as ACSA's Legislative Action Day, Chamber of Commerce Grass Roots Day.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The principal needs to be able to involve the faculty and staff in understanding the importance of school and community partnerships. A principal cannot neglect his or her primary responsibility of being the instructional leader at a school. This means that a principal must develop partnerships first with the staff. Hensely and Burmeister (2009) wrote:

Faculty and staff are always trying to “read” their leaders. Your positional power as a principal motivates them to understand who you are and what you believe. After all, the principal holds the keys to their success or failure in the workplace. You assign them; you evaluate them; and you provide them with support or withhold it from them. You are the “keeper of the vision.” If they understand your expectations for them, believe that the expectations are ethical, and trust that they can meet those expectations, they are more likely to support you as their leader. Your specific comments and actions can assure your colleagues that you are trustworthy and competent (p. 2).

Invite your community leaders to events at your school. Give them a reason to visit. Most are very willing to present certificates or plaques at special events honoring the school, students or staff. If they cannot attend they will send a representative. Develop relationships with company presidents or their representatives and familiarize these leaders with your school and issues. Share with them an informational paper about your school dealing with issues related to students, teachers, staff, school facilities, transformation, and concerns. However, do this always within the context of recognizing the teachers and staff. Barth (199) wrote:

Whereas it is important to the development of a community of leaders that teacher and principal share failures, I think it equally important that success reflect on the teacher, not the principal. . . .Visible, school wide success replenishes the teacher personally

and professionally. I have seen classroom performance, morale, commitment to teaching, and relationships with colleagues all benefit from public recognition (p. 138).

Activism involves advocacy on behalf of improving learning for students. Communicate with legislators using a variety of ways such as letters, faxes or emails, and phone calls. Be sure you know the agendas or specific issues of your legislator. Let them know your reasons for supporting or opposing a legislative bill they are setting forth for consideration. Include your community leaders on your school mailing list that you use in regular communication with your PTA, parents, etc. Send them your Newsletters, School Newspapers, and Brochures. In communicating “refrain from complaining. . . .no one likes to listen to a complainer. Complaining doesn’t help a situation” (Hensley & Burmeister, 2009, p. 126). Seek to communicate with clarity and professionalism.

Include staff members from your school or administrative colleagues, when visiting local businesses, government leaders and legislators. Keep the group small, no more than two to four. If you have more than that, you may overwhelm the person and sometimes their offices are too small to hold everyone anyway. The team approach is always very helpful and you can all take a part in the presentation. Remember to always follow-up meetings with a letter of appreciation/thank you and include any pertinent information promised.

Make personal presentations through visits with legislators, civic and local business leaders. Remember the legislators have local (district) offices, as well as offices at the capital. Always contact them to make an appointment in advance of your visit (about three weeks). Don’t be disappointed if you will talk to a staff member or assistant. Staff members communicate regularly with their bosses and are often better acquainted with the specifics of an issue or company. Never underestimate the importance of a legislator’s staff. Call on them when you don’t want something specific, and be brief. Being visible to them and attending fundraisers can provide an opportunity for relationship building. Remember that legislators may hold erroneous beliefs about education and need information that is research-based and accurate (Hafer, 2000).

Reach out to the community through a variety of ways. Maintain a membership in community service clubs, chambers of commerce, and foundations, etc. Talk as often as you can before each group about your school and educational issues. Take the opportunity of a special event in the community by volunteering student entertainment such as your orchestra, band, choral group, student clubs, etc. In many ways, students do more to keep the school in the public eye and win support for it than some of the other things that are done to bring about good community relations. Look at this as another opportunity to advocate for your school. Some schools overlook the opportunities connected with such routine events as commencements, plays, musicals, athletic events and service projects.

Stakeholders, including business people and government officials, can develop better understandings of schools through an “adopt a school program.” This means that a more formal partnership is created. Through such efforts stakeholders experience schools and become aware of needs. At the same time students benefit when the programs involve adults working directly with students. This may increase both the relevance of their learning as well as their motivation. Invite them to adopt your school and partner in school activities. There can be many advantages to this, like career speakers, volunteers, providing resources and equipment contributions, not just monetary gifts. This also provides the principal the

opportunity to convey to partners appreciation and “find the good in everyone and everything. . . .Find a way to celebrate individuals by finding the good in them. Their reaction toward you will be positive; they will appreciate your action and may even remember it” (Hensley & Burmeister, 2009, p. 106).

Remember that the school belongs to the community. This means that the community should have access to using its facilities. Organize and/or allow group functions at your school such as Town Hall Meetings, special events, banquets, legislative breakfasts, receptions, etc. This is another opportunity for the community to gain a more accurate understanding of the school and what is happening at the school that is making a positive difference in the lives of students.

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

The role of the principal in schools is multifaceted. The responsibilities are demanding. There needs to be a sense of balance, especially in the life of the principal. In reaching out and involving others, principals must take care of themselves.

Too many young as well as veteran leaders are keeling over with heart attacks or have illnesses that debilitate them emotionally, psychologically, and/or physically. Many of the leaders that we have spoken to are on some type of medication including blood pressure, cholesterol, or anti-anxiety medication. The job of a leader should be one that brings joy, excitement, and validation to one’s life. . . .These leaders have a passion for and are committed to a healthy life, nurturing relationships with their families and friends, and their jobs (Hensley & Burmeister, 2009, p. 97).

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