VOICES FROM THE FIELD

# power sharing

## Building Community School Relationships from Friendship to Marriage

by Carol R. Hill

Afterschool Matters is pleased to include a new regular section, Voices from the Field. This section features work by OST program practitioners including participants in Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowships in Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Pittsburgh. Fellows, who are selected by application, engage in a year-long process of reflection and inquiry to improve their practice and program quality. Voices from the Field highlights our Fellows' research and other practitioners' reflections. Its articles undergo a rigorous editorial process but are not peer reviewed.

When I accepted a job with the Bayview Hunters Point YMCA as the director of the Beacon Center on the campus of Burton High School in San Francisco, I found out that New Day for Learning (NDL), an initiative that helps schools implement the community schools model, had chosen Burton as a pilot site. Not having expected to be part of a community schools initiative, I was uneasy. I had cursory knowledge of community schools as "something they did in New York" in such programs as the Harlem Children's Zone. I had heard that community schools used community partners to help deliver programs and services to increase educational success for young people.

In my experience, Beacon-school partnerships worked similarly: the school focused on academic success during instructional time and partnered with the Beacon through a community-based organization (CBO) to deliver out-of-school time programs for both youth and adults after dismissal. Additionally, Beacons are charged specifically with turning schools into community hubs that not only bring people to the school site but also participate actively in community life. If those relationships didn't make us a community school, I didn't know what did. This school-CBO relationship had worked fine for decades. I thought, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"

What I didn't understand was that, though the relationship between Burton High School and the Beacon was not necessarily "broke," it could grow into an even more productive and valuable connection that would benefit all parties. This deeper relationship would go beyond successfully moving the Beacon "silo" next to the school's "silo." We would have to define success mutually from square one, engaging in the imperfect and exciting process of uniting separate and powerful entities. As the Burton-Beacon story illustrates, the community

schools model works best if the parties involved do more than collaborate. The most impressive and replicable outcomes will be achieved if the participants "power share."

## Snapshot: Revamping Expectations Two Months In

The school principal, the NDL director, and I were having our first meeting in some time. I was apprehensive. Clearly we were all committed to helping the school not only to improve, but also to thrive. From my perspective, the Beacon programs were developing well: afterschool participation had increased, especially in tutoring, and we had already held a huge community event in Bayview Hunters Point. As far as I knew, I was doing what we had agreed on. However, a couple of repetitions of "Can you drop by my office when you get a chance?" let me know that my partners were getting anxious.

I started honestly: "May I be frank?" (Since my name isn't Frank, the principal and NDL director snickered. One great thing about working with these two is that we all have a sense of humor.) "I'm not sure what you guys want. I was hired to put together this program. Now that it is becoming established, I'm getting negative feedback. If you have an idea or vision that you want me to follow, please give it to me and I will implement it. Other than that, I'm confused."

The principal replied simply, "That's just it, Carol. We don't want you to follow our vision. We feel that the only way this will work is if you co-create the vision with us!" It took a second for what he said to sink in, but then a light bulb went on in my head. The principal and NDL director weren't just units to manage. They wanted not only to collaborate, but also to get my input and help in decision making. Surprise gave way to hope and excitement.

I was experiencing a paradigm shift. My definition of success expanded. I saw the possibilities in the Beacon's goals being the school's goals and vice versa. My program had just moved from being an outside stakeholder to being part owner and creator of the vision that would capitalize on the strengths of all three partners. In that moment, I gave up the "bachelor life" and agreed to a lasting relationship with these entities. I felt that my CBO program was not only "at the table" but even had some power as co-author. I thought I'd better jump right in.

"OK," I said, "let's talk about goals and priorities." The principal began, "My first priority is this high school's students. We have to close the achievement gap, especially with 25 percent of the freshman class earning a GPA of 1.0 or below. So it seems to me that everything we do needs to go to address that." The NDL director followed: "That's great, but I want to make sure we can bring the appropriate services here in accordance with the community schools model. It's really our framework for success." For my turn, I said, "I understand both your priorities, but I need to add that, though my funders mandate that I serve this school, I also have to offer services to this community, as well as to Bayview residents. I can't prioritize one over the other." To which the principal said, "I don't care about the community." After I got over the shock, we all laughed (remember that sense of humor), and I said, "If we're creating this vision together, you're going to have to." We laughed again in relief and agreed to continue.

## Collaboration Theory

A few important things came out of that interaction. First, the conversation was honest. Second, each party articulated our needs, even though we didn't agree to adopt one another's agendas immediately and completely. Finally, we embraced the notion that we were doing more than just sharing space. We were co-creating a vision that we could all work toward. Clearly we had gone from partnering to something more profound.

Gil Noam, director of the Program in Afterschool Education and Research and associate professor at both the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Medical School, outlines four different kinds of intersection between schools and CBOs: *functional, collaborative, interconnected,* and *transformational* (Noam, 2001). I would boil these down to three categories that can be likened to the degree of seriousness and commitment in romantic relationships: friends with benefits, dating, and marriage. The form any given relationship takes depends largely on the reason for making the connection, how closely and how long the entities plan to work together, and what they plan to achieve.

### *Friends with Benefits = Partnership*

The "friends" relationship in a community school is characterized by impermanence. Partners can agree to have a connection without having to actually work together. The relationship is a fleeting or temporary rapport. The relationship

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may help to fill a real or perceived gap in services for one or both parties, but it doesn't necessarily do so. The reward may be simply that the CBO can claim a link with the school or vice versa. In other words, when you connect, it's great; if you don't, it's no problem. You have no long-term plans for a more permanent relationship. However, you say only good things (or nothing at all) about your partner.

Noam's *functional* model touches on this category. However, in my model, the "friends" category can lead to something greater—though not necessarily with the current partner. In this phase, partnerships are fairly easily severed. This was not the type of partnership I had planned to have with the school—I expected to get to the "dating" stage with Burton HS. However, I thought that friendship would be a close enough relationship with NDL.

### Dating = Collaboration

Collaborations, by contrast, inherently require action. Both the school and the CBO decide how their assets, services, and products can complement one another; then they plan to achieve a mutually beneficial goal. Typically, in Beacon relationships, the CBO approaches the school with a proposal to provide a service or to help solve a problem. In return for this service or solution, the CBO gains access to a population of potential participants, an outcome that is important to its funders. Both partners fill a gap, just as in successful dating relationships. People usually enter into a dating relationship to ascertain whether or not they share enough mutual interests and goals to support a deeper bond. A dating-level partnership between a school and a CBO is a similar commitment. Noam (2001) would call this a *collaborative* relationship, "as it leads to the following ends: to make programming possible; to gain access to children, families and funds; or to gain access to previously closed settings such as schools or communities" (p. 11).

I was expecting to have this "dating/collaboration" partnership with Burton HS. This kind of relationship works when the parties want to be connected while maintaining autonomy. I wanted to collaborate closely, but not so closely that I could not extricate my Beacon if we needed to move or modify the program. I wanted to "date seriously," but not be "married."

### Marriage = Power Sharing

For routinely commitment-phobic individuals (like me) or organizations, partnerships and collaborations are the safest and most common relationships. Partnerships and collaborations work even if neither party changes anything about itself. However, for "marriage" to work, each entity must surface its expectations and needs. Then each is likely to have to yield at least somewhat to the other in order to achieve a vision that both entities create together. This relationship requires vulnerability and trust. It involves a fair amount of processing. It is transformative for both parties. The school and CBO are stakeholders in each other's individual, as well as mutual, victories. Such a successful union is characterized by power sharing.

Power sharing requires honest recognition and valuation of the assets that each party brings to the table. Then the entities consciously and intentionally co-create their vision. There is no "yours" and "mine" but only "ours." The mutually beneficial outcomes of the co-created vision are *our* outcomes. The school and CBO silos do not merely abut each other; they are torn apart and reconstructed in a way that makes the sharing of resources logical and beneficial to all, especially to youth and communities.

The power-sharing relationship is similar to Noam's *interconnected* school-CBO relationship. In this model, the "sense of intimacy between the partners and their staff and organizational issues might be sufficiently worked out to consider the collaboration as a separate, new entity" (Noam, 2001, p. 13). During the moment in the meeting I describe earlier when I was invited to co-create the vision, a new world of possibilities for more intense and permanent connection with the school opened up in the near future. Basically, the principal asked my Beacon to marry the school, and I accepted. I've made the shift from "girlfriend" to "fiancée."

We're still engaged rather than married at this point. Though the principal and I have deepened the relationship between the school and the Beacon, we still have kinks to work out. There's the matter of the "in-laws"—all the outside entities that we answer to, separately and together, from my lead agency and the San Francisco school district to funders and the San Francisco Beacon initiative—who have to be brought onboard and kept in the loop. We also have to consider the "children" of each party: youth, our staffs, and community residents, to name a few. The process of integration only begins with the Beacon and the school deciding to "get hitched." Now we have the responsibility and the license to begin the real work of implementing the community schools approach by seamlessly and intentionally blending our "families."

Noam says that hardly any collaboration attains the level of his fourth category, *transformative*. "The benefit of this mode over the interconnected one is that learning is an essential ingredient. There is no transformation of values and perspective either individually or collectively without a process of learning" (Noam, 2001, p. 13). The relationship between the school and the Beacon is not

quite there yet—but there is hope. The learning process Noam emphasizes is an essential component of the relationship between the school and CBO. So are patience and forgiveness, which, in our case, have grown as we have learned from our many mistakes and missteps. The Beacon has already integrated physically into the school. For example, the Beacon employment coordinator now works in the school's college and career office. Such moves help to create the synergy that can lead to transformation.

## The Honeymoon and Beyond

So far, the "marriage"—the process of power sharing—has not been easy. We have lots and lots of meetings. We have to constantly remember that these gatherings help facilitate the learning process as well as genuine buy-in. Without these two elements, we will not be able to sustain any progress or replicate positive results. Both the Beacon and the school have to actively resist going back into our silos.

All this hard work has led to real progress in bringing the entities closer together. After the meeting I describe earlier, NDL convened a Community Schools Conference in San Francisco. For the first time, all the major partners housed at the school sat at a table to discuss the community school model and brainstorm ways of implementing it. The conversation was often difficult; it helped me understand that we needed to address issues within our separate entities before people could really be open to integration. But that conference helped plant a seed. Later, the school principal, with the help of NDL, convened a meeting of all the partners at the high school to cultivate more mutual and long-term partnerships. After that, to facilitate streamlining of services, the school restructured the leadership team so that the Beacon handles many of the smaller partnerships.

In the restructuring, I represent many non-instructional constituents on the administrative team and department head teams. These meetings give me firsthand information about the school's concerns, especially the instructional and operational issues. I can also help to bring attention to the interests of families and the surrounding community in a way that had not been done before.

In an ongoing effort to increase the school's visibility to the residents of the area, the principal began to participate in and speak at Beacon community events. About six months into the collaboration, the San Francisco Beacon Initiative brought the principal, assistant principal, and me together with community school expert Marty Blank. It was like having a personal master class on community schools! After hearing what we'd done so far, Blank complimented us by saying we were doing great work.

When I attended the Community Schools Conference in Philadelphia with the San Francisco Beacon staff, I really wished that the principal had been able to attend as well, as I was seeing that getting information at the same time was beneficial to both parties. As a substitute, I brought back books on community schools. To ensure that we all had similar information, the principal bought the same books for the leadership team. We formed a learning group to study these and other materials.

Integration of school and Beacon programs began in earnest with the establishment of a plan for a seamless school day. Puma Block (named for the school mascot) now encompasses all afterschool and Saturday activities. Teachers generally bought into the plan, with a few reservations. The Beacon fostered parent and family engagement by beginning adult classes in GED preparation, English as a second language, and computer basics. We also convened an advisory board, made up of youth, parents, teachers, CBO staff, and school administrators, to focus on parent engagement. Finally, the Beacon staff offices integrated into the school. Instead of concentrating in one room, Beacon staff relocated to the dean's office, counseling office, main office, and parent liaison office. Getting out of our Beacon silo and into the school offices helps us to serve students and parents in a way that makes sense *to them.* Furthermore, the summer school in 2011 was run by the Beacon in collaboration with other major partners.

Just as in a marriage, co-creating a shared vision, a viable work plan, and shared outcomes has its peaks and valleys. It also takes a long time and daily attention. Burton HS is reinventing itself as a community school: a hub of high academic achievement for all students, grounded by services and programs designed to engage and grow healthy families and communities. The rewards that youth and parents have already reaped confirm for me that we are on the right track. Though the unification of Burton and the Beacon has not been elegant by any means, we work at it every day—as in a good marriage. I look forward to reporting in a couple of years that our common bond has yielded wildly compelling results for both the school, in collaboration with the Bayview Beacon, and the surrounding community. Those results will be a testament to the very real *power* in power sharing.

## Reference

Noam, G. (2001). *Afterschool time: Toward a theory of collaborations*. Retrieved from http://www.naesp.org/resources/1/A_New_Day_for_Learning_Resources/Making_the_Case/Afterschool_Time_Toward_a_Theory_of_Collaborations.pdf