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ABSTRACT

If schools are to respond successfully to increased accountability requirements, they must find ways to address non-cognitive factors that can impede student learning. Findings from a study of school districts along the U.S.-Mexico border show educators grappling with the impact of poverty and poor health on students' readiness to learn. These districts are meeting students' non-academic needs by partnering with human services agencies, pooling resources from multiple agencies, and sharing resources across districts. For impoverished districts across the country, partnerships between schools and parents, human services agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and local governments are a vehicle for providing comprehensive, but not duplicative, services to students and their families. Research suggests that effective partnerships have common characteristics: a formalized structure for ongoing collaboration, coherent funding streams, time and resources for planning and developing relationships, incentives to support staff recruitment and retention, well-designed data collection and evaluation plans, information technology to support data-driven management, and technical assistance before and during program implementation. Recommendations related to each of these areas are offered to federal, state, and local policymakers to support school-community partnerships. (SV)

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DECEMBER 2002

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USING School-Community PARTNERSHIPS TO Bolster Student Learning

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The best of teaching cannot always compete successfully with the challenges many students face outside of school. This understanding is not new; many schools and other public agencies have long histories of working together to ensure that students, and sometimes their families, have access to needed health and social services. What is new, however, is the proliferation of state and federal accountability measures — chief among them No Child Left Behind *— that tie school and district funding and/or autonomy to student achievement. The demands of such legislation, coupled with knowledge about the impact of non-cognitive[1] barriers to student learning, are causing growing numbers of schools and districts to identify student well-being as an integral part of their education mandate.*

Research and experience confirm the connection between students' mental and physical health and their school attendance and academic achievement.[2] Some conditions that jeopardize learning, such as emotional neglect, physical abuse, and other family dysfunction, can be found across the socioeconomic spectrum. Others are caused or aggravated by poverty and, thus, bound to become more common given the current recession and rising poverty rates.[3]

This *Policy Brief* examines how school-community partnerships can help mitigate the non-cognitive barriers to learning so students can achieve to high standards. It identifies the lessons being learned from such partnerships and offers practical policy recommendations for local, state, and federal policymakers.

Schools Respond to Increasing Student Needs

In the United States today, a significant number of children are affected by circumstances that can threaten their learning: 16 percent[4] (and higher for minorities) live in poverty, 11 million have no health coverage, and an estimated 20 percent suffer from poor mental health.[5] For many of these children, longstanding services provided by schools, such as free or reduced-price meals for eligible students and basic health screening by a school nurse, do not suffice. If schools are to respond successfully to increased accountability requirements, they must find additional ways to address the non-cognitive factors that can impede student learning.

Findings from a recent WestEd study[6] of school districts along the United States/Mexico border, an area known as La Frontera, underscore the significance of this issue. With pockets of extreme poverty and a large immigrant population, this region represents a compelling example of educators grappling with the issue of students' readiness to learn. Health-related needs seem particularly pressing. For example, 12 percent of its communities have no available health care, 31 percent have no dental services, and 26 percent have no mental health services. La Frontera schools are increasingly viewed as the one viable hub around which these types of assistance can be offered. In many cases, ensuring services for their students requires districts and schools to seek out and partner with human service agencies from other, often distant, communities.

La Frontera districts are taking different approaches to meeting students' non-academic needs. Some rural districts partner with health providers or universities to offer mobile health or dental units that regularly visit schools. Others address a wider range of needs. Nearly 40 percent provide substance abuse counseling to students and/or families. One district, pooling resources from 90 agencies, offers a one-stop support center for families with such services as employment and social security assistance, child care, and even driving instruction.

The Promises and Challenges of School-Community Partnerships

Around the country, school districts serving impoverished communities are taking similar action. These collaborative efforts attempt to offer cohesive, comprehensive services, as compared to the status quo in which programs serving the same student or family often work in relative isolation from one another. In

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addition to being costly, this fragmented programmatic approach works against positive results.[7] In contrast, school-community partnerships provide and coordinate services, such as early intervention programs; school-based health care; violence, alcohol, and drug abuse prevention; before- and after-school programs for students; and, for families, child care, job training, and literacy programs.

The composition and complexity of partnerships vary widely, depending on such factors as community needs and existing resources.[8] However, researchers agree that multi-agency collaboratives are the most effective vehicle for providing comprehensive, but not duplicative, services to students and their families. Through such partnerships, schools, parents, human service agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and local government work together to design strategies to address local needs.[9]

Yet collaboratives are not easily developed. For one thing, many are launched with little or no new funding. Instead, participating organizations attempt to coordinate or redistribute existing resources to better serve students. A host of other complex challenges can hinder efforts: lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities; "turf wars"; difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff due to part-time hours, low salaries, and limited advancement opportunities; and differences in organizational cultures and goals. Additional impediments include logistical complications, such as transportation,[10] questions about location of services,[11] and administrative and legal hurdles for sharing data (e.g., test scores, medical records).

Lessons Being Learned

Existing evaluation studies show that the positive outcomes of successful collaboration can justify the effort. Results can include student academic achievement gains, improved social behavior, reductions in youth crime and violence, increased parent involvement, and enhanced community life.[12] Research suggests some common characteristics among effective partnerships:

- *Formalized infrastructure for ongoing collaboration.* Many communities have found it helpful to establish a formal organization, with representatives from schools, local service providers, funders, and other key stakeholders, especially families, to plan and support school-linked services. Existing public or nonprofit agencies may initiate and provide a home base for this group, but once organized, it operates as an autonomous entity. This more formal approach encourages commitment and communication and supports sustainability.
- *Coherent funding streams.* When funders collaborate themselves, a partnership's fundraising burden is lightened. Funders can also align their evaluation requirements, further streamlining administrative demands on service providers.[13] At the federal level, this approach is exemplified by the Safe Schools/Healthy Students program, which blends funding from the Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services. At the local level, Beacon Centers in cities such as San Francisco and New York use an intermediary agency to combine funding from multiple private funders.[14]
- *Time and resources for planning and developing relationships.* During start-up, sufficient time is needed to identify appropriate partners, build relationships, determine a common mission, and assign roles and responsibilities. The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL (Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning) initiative provides collaboratives with six years of implementation funding, but also provides up to two years of funding specifically designated for pre-planning and planning.[15]
- *Incentives to support staff recruitment and retention.* Inducements such as full-time employment, especially with health benefits, do much to attract and retain qualified staff. To this end, some localities have combined part-time responsibilities into full-time positions that can be offered with employee benefits.[16] Other collaboratives have worked with local schools and colleges to offer credits, stipends, supervised internships, and other enticements for young people to learn about and enter the field.
- *Well-designed data collection and evaluation plans.* Quality plans combine input from all partners, who, together, define the mission and short- and long-term goals.[17] By using data to show impact and monitor continuous improvement toward the goals, partnerships are better equipped to garner community support and additional funding. Some partnerships are proactively designing evaluation systems that will help them become increasingly effective and, at the same time, meet the often-cited burden of data collection and paperwork from the separate evaluation requirements of multiple funders.
- *Information technology to support data-driven management.* Effective partnerships make use of advanced information technology that allows partner agencies to collect, analyze, and share information for multiple purposes, including data-driven decision making for program monitoring and evaluation, as well as communication with parents and community supporters.[18]
- *Technical assistance before and during implementation.* While many grants and programs offer technical assistance, localities still lack sufficient awareness of such resources and have difficulty accessing them. Studies show that collaborative partnerships benefit from using research-based assistance in professional development, data-driven decision making, monitoring of goals, identification of potential funders, and advocacy.[19] A common strategy is for funders and providers to identify a neutral third party — an intermediary — to provide or broker this assistance.

Policy Recommendations

Policy and funding support for school-community partnerships has been growing. Yet many partnerships still face hurdles, especially at the local level where the capacity to build and manage collaborative action is often weak. This section offers recommendations for supporting school-community partnerships so they can more effectively meet students' needs.

Policy and Funding Coordination

MUNICIPAL/COUNTY

Establish a local body to coordinate policy and funding for collaborative activity. This body may have decision-making authority or may be limited to an advisory role. In either case, its members must develop a shared mission and goals, establish clear partner roles and responsibilities, and do both with an ear to the diverse needs and perspectives of the broader community, including other providers, as well as students and their families. This body may also assume operational responsibilities, serving as the common fiscal agent, central data depository, or technical assistance broker.

STATE

Create funding mechanisms that integrate support across a wide variety of children's health-and-safety services and allow implementation flexibility. State policymakers should pool resources from multiple agencies to fund programs addressing common goals. To ensure local accountability and flexibility, states should identify and enforce performance standards, rather than mandating program design elements.

Allocate adequate time and financial support for planning. Funding incentives and performance requirements should recognize the challenge of starting a collaborative by giving greater support to early-stage planning and organizational development.

Staff Development

MUNICIPAL/COUNTY

Seek opportunities to support recruitment and retention of quality staff. Localities should support the creation of full-time jobs, for example, by combining part-time positions from different partner agencies. They should consider including more part-time workers in health- and pension-benefit systems and encourage partner organizations to do so as well.

STATE

Reorganize current funding streams to ensure that resources can be used for professional development. Many funding streams are limited to paying for direct services and cannot be used for other important program elements such as professional development. Such impediments to professional growth should be eliminated.

Data Management and Technology

MUNICIPAL/COUNTY

Encourage development of common data collection protocols and data-sharing agreements across local agencies. Many communities have developed ways to share data while protecting confidential information. To facilitate integrated program management and meaningful evaluation, local officials should examine existing rules to understand how they can share and collect needed data.

STATE

Review and align evaluation requirements across programs supporting school-linked services. Policymakers can alleviate administrative burdens and reduce barriers to local collaboration by streamlining evaluation requirements across programs.

Reorganize current funding streams to support data-driven decision making by allowing spending for technology and related staff development. To better support and monitor data collection, program management, and evaluation, partnerships must be able to use some of their available funding on their technology needs, including equipment, applications, and staff development.

Research and Technical Assistance

MUNICIPAL/COUNTY

Establish local infrastructure to broker access to technical assistance. Ensure sufficient resources to assess program development-and-training needs and to match those needs to available resources. Depending on the community, the partnership may establish such infrastructure within a school district, city agency, or local intermediary organization.

FEDERAL

Support continued research in the field of school-community partnerships. While school-community partnerships are not new, few have been rigorously researched or evaluated.[20] Further study is needed to build greater understanding of best practices and to develop more valid and reliable evaluation indicators.

Facilities and Transportation

MUNICIPAL/COUNTY

Reduce barriers to joint use and maintenance of facilities. Community partners need to work with school districts and community-based facilities operators to remove barriers to using facilities for school-linked services. Some communities have creatively restructured financing, union contracts, and maintenance plans to maximize use of facilities. When planning new construction, localities should consider joint and/or community use needs.

STATE/FEDERAL

Redirect or create funding sources to provide transportation in support of school-linked services. In some communities, additional funds will be needed to ensure student access to services that are either located away from the school site or provided before or after regular school hours. Such funds could be used to expand existing school bus service, supplement public transit, or support individualized bus or van service if needed.

Endnotes

1 Factors such as malnutrition, lack of medical care, inadequate child care, poverty, teen pregnancy, crime, violence, frequent moves, and other social conditions impact students' ability to learn. Collins, T. & Flaxman, E. (2001). "Improving urban and rural schools and their communities." In *The ERIC Review*. Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 2–4; U.S. Department of Education (1996). *Putting the pieces together: Comprehensive school-linked strategies for children and families*. Washington, DC: Author.

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5 U.S. Surgeon General. (1999). *Mental health: A report of the Surgeon General*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

6 Koehler, P., Chow, S., Lee-Bayha, J., & Harrison, T. (2002). *Voices from La Frontera: Study of school districts along the United States/Mexico border*. San Francisco: WestEd. Available: www.wested.org/lafrontera/techrpt.

7 Noam, G. G., & Miller, B. M. (eds.) (2002).

8 Decker, L. E., & Decker, V. A. (2001). *Engaging families and communities: Pathways to educational success*. Fairfax, VA: Decker & Associates.

9 See Endnote 2.

10, 11 Personal interviews with program or project directors; Morrill, W.A. (1992). "Overview of service delivery to children." *The future of children: School linked services*, 2, (1), Spring, 32–43; www.gse.harvard.edu/%7Ehfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html

12 See Endnote 2.

13 Bruner, C. (1991). *Thinking collaboratively: Ten questions and answers to help policy makers improve children's services*. Washington, DC: Education and Human Services Consortium; www.communityschools.org.

14 Walker, K. E., & Arbreton, A. J. A. (2001).

15 www.coralconnect.org.

16 Noam, G. G., & Miller, B. M. (Eds.). (2002).

17 U.S. Department of Education (1996).

18 www.sshsac.org.

19 See Endnote 2.

20 Dryfoos, J., & Maguire, S. (2002); Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2001); U.S. General Accounting Office. (2000).

This *Policy Brief* is issued by the WestEd Policy Program. It was written by June Lee-Bayha and Tenley Harrison with contributions from Suzanne D. Goldstein. For more information, call 415.615.3160 or visit the Policy Program Web site, www.WestEd.org/policy.

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