

Principles of Effective Partnerships

Effective partnerships between organizations require effort and commitment. All sides of the partnership have to want to collaborate and be willing to make it work. While you cannot plan for every eventuality along the way, there are some basic steps you can take to make the partnership run smoothly:

1. Plan Together from the Start

Often partnerships get started because one party writes a grant proposal and needs a support letter from one or more collaborators – but the partners don't really begin working together until "the check is in the mail." **A much more effective approach is to get the leadership of the partner organizations together at the outset to conduct joint planning, visioning, and problem solving.** Make sure you draw on needs assessment data from both sides of the partnership. For example, use school data (such as grades, test scores, attendance, and suspension metrics) as well as program and community data (including enrollment/participation information and statistics about housing, unemployment and safety) as you conduct your joint planning.

2. Clarify the Vision

The greatest benefit of working in partnership is that it enables groups to achieve results they could not possibly accomplish individually. **The most effective partnerships develop and own a shared sense of purpose.** Most partnerships have found it useful to create a written vision statement that guides all of their subsequent work. Such a vision statement can outline specific goals but should also communicate the partnership's overarching purpose, philosophy and long-term aspirations.

3. Take Time to Get to Know One Another

In the press of daily business, partners might be tempted to ignore this step, thinking of it as a luxury. **Experience reveals that taking the time to get to know one another is a cost-effective step that can prevent later misunderstandings. Think of this step as an investment.** In a school-community based organization (CBO) partnership, for example, the CBO leaders and staff should spend time on site in the school, during the regular school day; and school leaders and staff should visit the CBO to better understand its operating context. This way both sides of the partnership can learn about one another's core competencies and on-the-ground challenges.

4. Set Ground Rules

Jointly develop ground rules for who will lead meetings, how decisions will be made, how problems will be addressed, how grievances will be handled, etc. **You won't be able to anticipate every challenge, but clear guidelines and procedures can help your partnership avoid unnecessary pitfalls.** Having these discussions early – before the first conflict arises – can help the partners build trust and learn about one another's working styles.

5. Start Small and Build Gradually

You don't have to initiate a full-scale partnership in the first year. **You might, for example, consider starting with a small after-school program in the first year, then add components and participants the second year, all while gradually identifying ways to integrate the partners' resources and capacities.** It's

important to identify some “quick wins” that will allow the partnership to get off to a strong start. Quick wins are usually those that require less time, address “low-hanging-fruit” needs, and build momentum for the partnership.

6. Involve Parents as Partners

The sooner you involve parents from the community, the easier it will be to spread the word of your new program, make sound decisions, and build community trust. **With their unique perspectives on the strengths and needs of their community, parents and other residents will have many insights to share, especially when the key elements of the partnership are still on the drawing board.**

7. Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

Effective partnerships rely on clear communication and a shared understanding of who will be responsible for what. **Given that there are usually multiple players involved, it's best to get written agreements and protocols that outline the basic elements of the partnership.** These written documents should be jointly developed and occasionally reviewed/updated by the partners.

8. Share Decision-Making

Throughout the implementation of the partnership – from design and planning to daily operation – **multiple perspectives should be consulted and given ample opportunities to provide input and feedback about program components or other key questions.** Shared decision-making and strong leadership are not contradictory. The most effective partnerships find meaningful ways to lift up the voices and build the decision-making capacities of all constituent groups – especially those who have been traditionally marginalized and young people themselves.

9. Prepare Team Members to Work Together

Another critical cost of doing business in a partnership is professional development and capacity-building. **Make sure you arrange for joint orientation and training opportunities to enable all the partners to develop the skills they will need to make their collaboration work.** Small, interactive workshops should focus on developing team building, shared decision-making, communication, continuous improvement, and conflict resolution skills.

10. Stay Flexible

Effective school-community partnerships require willingness from all involved to be flexible. Expect that some things will not go exactly as planned, and prepare to adapt new ways of working so that it may be done together. **Also, remember that the context on all sides of the partnership keeps changing.** Schools will get new mandates; CBOs will gain and lose funding streams; government agencies will shift priorities as leadership and regulations change. All of these inevitable occurrences will affect – but should not derail – your partnership if you are prepared and can stay flexible.

11. Keep Nurturing the Relationships

Team building is not a one-time event; it needs continued examination and daily effort. And this is true at all levels of the partnership—from the systemic leaders to the on-the-ground interactions between community members and line staff.

12. Be Strategic

In meetings with partners, listen carefully to what's on their minds, and think about ways you can respond to their needs. As funding, policy, and community conditions change, all partners face significant challenges and crises at different times. Partnerships can present opportunities to manage those challenges. **Constantly assess what your organization can bring to the collaboration (including programmatic, human and financial resources) – and be proactive in offering to make these resources available to your partners.**