

Putting the Pieces Together Comprehensive School-Linked Strategies for Children and Families

Chapter 1 Building Collaborative Partnerships

How do collaborative efforts get started?

How does a collaborative partnership plan for action?

The axiom that two heads are better than one really is true when it comes to strengthening children and families in a holistic way. By thinking, planning, and working together, the individuals and groups that make a community can accomplish goals that neither could achieve alone.

Diverse stakeholders shape their holistic efforts through **collaborative partnerships**. These partnerships give communities a structure for organizing, planning, and implementing their ideas. Collaborative partnerships are the mechanism for designing **comprehensive strategies** that strengthen children and families.

The process of building a collaborative partnership is multidimensional. It involves:

- recognizing opportunities for change;
- mobilizing people and resources to create changes;
- developing a vision of long-term change;
- seeking support and involvement from diverse and non-traditional partners;
- choosing an effective group structure;
- building trust among collaborators; and
- developing learning opportunities for partners.

Although the effort takes time and requires careful attention, it's essential to creating strong, viable partnerships that produce lasting change. This chapter addresses the work that collaborative partnerships typically engage in as they begin and as they move toward action.

How Do Collaborative Efforts Get Started?

Comprehensive partnerships begin because individuals reach out to like-minded people and groups to

address issues that affect children and families.

There are many catalysts for comprehensive partnerships. Some form when school leaders or local policymakers initiate collaboration. Others begin when a community becomes aware of an urgent need for change, or when funding becomes available to respond to conditions in the community. For example, a school superintendent, notified of new public or private funds for comprehensive services, may work with teachers, parents, and community agencies to develop school-linked strategies for health care, adult education, child care, job preparation, and violence prevention programs. Or, school staff may initiate collaboration with the community to respond to a recognized need:

In rural Kentucky, school staff learned of a developmentally delayed preschool child whose parents had been unaware of the community services available to them but were willing to work with school, health, and human service providers to enroll the child in a preschool program. Agency staff formed a team to support the parents' efforts to work with their child at home. They also helped the father enroll in a job training program. Encouraged by the success of this collaboration, the team decided to formalize its partnership in order to tackle similar issues.

Sometimes, parents initiate collaboration:

In Salinas, California, a small group of Spanish-speaking families with seriously ill children formed a support group for children and families. Partners included the American Cancer Society; a Spanish-speaking outreach liaison from the school district; and Healthy Start, a state initiative that links families with multiple community agencies and providers. The families meet weekly at the Healthy Start center to learn about local services and to support each other as they confront their children's problems. The partnership has been so successful in empowering parents that some participants have begun to provide leadership to other Healthy Start projects.

Once an individual or small group of planners lights the spark of collaboration, school leaders join with families, community leaders and representatives, and health and human service providers to forge individual programs into comprehensive strategies. This core group evolves into a collaborative effort by (1) understanding the context for collaboration, (2) expanding to include parents and other community partners, (3) forming a partnership, and (4) establishing an effective governance structure.

Understanding the Context for Collaboration

Before you can determine how to develop comprehensive strategies in your community, you will want to know what local conditions will support or inhibit a collaborative effort. You can learn about the school's readiness for collaboration by talking with school administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff; parents and parent-teacher organization leaders; and teacher union leaders. At the school district level, Title I coordinators, volunteer coordinators, and other program administrators can explain the district's policies, practices, and perspectives. In the community, religious leaders, city or county council members, and representatives of neighborhood and youth-serving organizations can provide useful insights into the potential for a comprehensive partnership.

Be sure to involve community members, parents, and other partners in developing an understanding of the context for collaboration. You may want to consider the following questions:

Which stakeholders have an interest in the partnership you are planning?

Who might be willing to join your collaboration? Will the attitudes and culture of the school, the school district, and the community support the partnership?

Are the school, district, and other potential partners willing to share their resources and capacities?

How do the interests of each potential partner fit into the broader collaboration? How can administrators of specific programs (e.g., Title I, special education, school volunteers) join with other partners in a unified effort?

Expanding the Involvement of Families and the Community

It isn't enough to simply round up the "usual suspects"--the core group of teachers, parents, and business leaders who already participate in collaborations between schools, families, and communities. If your comprehensive partnership is going to have a complete picture of community strengths, conditions, and resources, you'll want to enlist families and community leaders who may be disenfranchised from traditional groups but still have their finger on the pulse of important segments of the community.

Don't wait for these stakeholders to walk through the schoolhouse door; send representatives from your planning group to neighborhood association meetings, the city planning office, and cultural and community centers to invite these players to join your partnership. Try to enlist people who truly understand and are committed to the goals of your partnership--not those who are simply assigned by their supervisors to collaborate. You can also increase the investment of potential partners by asking them to help collect information about the local context for collaboration.

Forming a Partnership

As your partnership begins to take shape, you will want to make sure you are attracting appropriate participants to the collaborating table--and that they can work effectively once they get there. Experienced partnerships offer the following advice:

- **Ensure a broad-based, inclusive partnership** by seeking partners who represent a cross-section of the community: parents, principals, teachers, counselors and other school staff, cultural and religious leaders, health care and human service providers, business and political leaders, staff and administrators from community organizations, and representatives from local universities and student groups. Make sure your partners reflect diverse perspectives, experiences, cultures, and levels of authority.
- **Don't wait for all partners to get on board before moving forward** with your plans. Most partnerships expand gradually over time. For example, in one community a partnership that focused on school-linked strategies eventually joined forces with a partnership concerned with community policing. The joint effort, dubbed "Peace Builders," built capacity for conflict resolution and supported community policing strategies. As the entire community gradually embraced the idea, the size and impact of the new partnership grew.
- **Secure a commitment to collaboration.** You may want to ask partner organizations to designate representatives' names and responsibilities in writing; this makes it more likely the same people will be at the table every time the group meets. It also helps move decisions along quickly if organization representatives are authorized to make commitments for their employers.

Once your partners are in place, you are ready to establish a governing structure for the partnership. Take some planning time to consider the following questions:

Will responsibility be shared equally, or will one partner take the lead?

How will decisions be made among partners?

The answers to these questions will be shaped by the extent to which partners share goals, responsibility, and authority; the comprehensiveness of the partnership and its strategies; and the level of resources and policy support for the collaboration.

Establishing an Effective Governance Structure

There is no prescription for the ideal size or design of a leadership group. However, in many communities a two-tiered approach to governance helps partners balance the need for broad oversight with practical considerations. A small management group (10-15 members) that can respond quickly to immediate concerns has responsibility for day-to-day management, while a larger oversight group (30-50 members) meets periodically to consider long-term issues and ensure diverse representation.

Partnerships often use one of the following strategies to create a governance structure that encourages collaboration:

- **Select a lead agency.** One organization--often the school--may be selected to manage the school-linked partnership. "Linkages to Learning," a partnership for school-linked comprehensive services in Montgomery County, Maryland, is led by the county health and human services department's division of children, youth, and family services. This agency coordinated the community assessment, contacted potential partners, organized initial meetings, and developed a memorandum of understanding among other partner agencies. It continues to facilitate planning retreats for program staff, provide a coordinator who organizes partnership meetings, and contribute the majority of staff members. To ensure that the lead agency does not assume undue influence or bear an unfair burden, partners must devise ways to involve all agencies and organizations in decisionmaking--for example, by rotating the responsibility for conducting meetings among partners.
 - **Create a new nonprofit agency.** Privately funded ventures, such as the Cities in Schools partnerships, often formally set up a new agency to manage comprehensive school-linked strategies. This approach frees collaborators from the constraints of existing institutions and opens the possibility for change. However, partnerships that choose this strategy need ample time and support to allow schools, agencies, and other organizations to coordinate their efforts with the new entity.
 - **Build a consortium of agencies.** In contrast to a new agency, a consortium is an informal organization established and run jointly by the partners. It ensures shared leadership and collaboration and requires that partners be involved in multiple aspects of the collaboration on an ongoing basis. For example, the Local Investment Commission (LINC) in Kansas City, Missouri is guided by a 36-member consortium whose members range from chief executive officers of local corporations to low-income parents. A "professional cabinet" of service experts advises the consortium in its focus on professional development and comprehensive neighborhood services for 16 communities. In addition, three permanent committees address such critical implementation issues as financial management and operations, data and evaluation, and communication and advocacy. This governance structure allows each individual and group to contribute specific expertise to the consortium, and streamlines the decisionmaking process of the larger consortium by having smaller working groups attend to the details of issues such as financial planning.
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Creative Approaches Can Increase a Governance Group's Effectiveness

A large governing group can form subgroups to build communication and trust, and prepare members to address specific topics. For example, the oversight committee of one partnership has 50 members who break into subgroups with each subgroup including parents, school staff, agency representatives, and community members. Representatives from all of the stakeholder groups also participate in a 12-member governance group to provide ongoing policy direction. Small groups provide opportunities for parents and other partners to get to know each other personally, before they work together in larger settings.

Providing a variety of options for participation enables many types of partners to contribute to your efforts. Some people work best in small groups, while others prefer large committees. Some partners make powerful presentations, while others contribute best by writing down their concerns and impressions.

The use of jargon-free language and bilingual translators is essential to help all partners understand the issues and feel that their contributions are valued. When everyone has the opportunity to discuss ideas together, partners arrive at a common understanding.

How Does a Collaborative Partnership Plan for Action?

Evolving collaborative partnerships often struggle between the desire to take immediate action and the need to plan for a sustained effort. There is no specific formula for how much time and energy to initially allocate for building relationships or for planning strategies, but experienced partnerships agree that both activities are essential to long-term success.

Planning for action involves (1) establishing guidelines for partner relationships, (2) defining a target community, (3) creating trust and a shared vision among partners, and (4) building cultural awareness. These steps take time, but they lay a firm foundation for future action.

Establishing Guidelines for Partner Relationships

The challenge of putting collaboration into action raises many practical issues:

Where will the partners meet to conduct business? Will one agency's facilities be used, or will meetings rotate among several facilities?

Who will attend the meetings? What time(s) of the day or week are most convenient for them?

How will child care be provided?

How often will the group meet? Will it meet for the same purpose every time? How long will meetings last?

Who will determine the agenda for each meeting? How and when will partners submit agenda items?

Will the position of chairperson rotate or remain stable?

Who will distribute briefing materials to participants? Who will record and distribute meeting

minutes?

Will tasks be delegated to subcommittees? If so, which ones? Who will staff subcommittees, and how will topics and members be selected?

How can the meeting format best accommodate communication styles and preferences within the community? (For example, are informal meetings with refreshments best?)

Clear guidelines and procedures that address these issues can help ensure effective communication, minimize misunderstandings, and enhance collaboration among partners and agencies. Guidelines are an important part of team building and collaboration; the process of deciding how to work together can actually bring diverse stakeholders together.

The guidelines your partnership chooses should be based on the unique context of your community. However, two general strategies can help most partnerships work effectively:

- **Share the spotlight; seek input from all partners.** In a truly collaborative effort, partners relate to each other on a non-hierarchical basis, regardless of the organizational structure (Jehl & Kirst, 1992). No single agency, organization, or individual should dominate or control the decisionmaking process. You can promote this balance by setting goals for your comprehensive partnership that are broader than the goals of any participating agency or individual and cannot be reached through the efforts of any single group.
- **Include families in decisionmaking.** Parents bring unique perspectives and skills to partnerships and are knowledgeable about the community's cultures and languages. Parents remind school professionals that their issues require more complex solutions than simply creating a new categorical program, and parents can educate other partners by describing what they and their children experience in the community outside the school or agency. By involving families in decisionmaking, emerging partnerships may find strategies that eluded professional staff and also demonstrate that families are respected as full partners. However, the schedules of working parents may make it hard for them to participate unless the partnership schedules meetings on evenings or weekends--and provides child care.

Tips for Taking Action: Guidelines and Procedures for Shared Decisionmaking

Partners often use the following approaches:

Group consensus. Decisions made by consensus require input from each member and agreement that he or she understands, supports, and is willing to implement the group's decision. This method is ideal for partnerships because the process requires thorough discussion of alternatives, allows all voices to be heard, and fosters commitment. Consensus decisionmaking can be time consuming. To reach a decision in the time allotted, groups sometimes have to resort to another method such as majority rule.

Committee decisionmaking. Sometimes a few members are appointed to a committee to decide an issue on behalf of the full membership. This process expedites work; however, not all members of the larger group may support the committee's decision. If the larger group frequently overrides decisions, committees may begin to question their investment of time and effort.

Majority Rule. With this approach, the greatest number of votes carries the decision. Because it is a winner-take-all method, it may erode participants' commitment to collaboration and is probably most useful for deciding minor issues.

Defining a Target Community

Defining a community involves (1) identifying a group or groups of people with whom the comprehensive partnership should focus its efforts, and (2) choosing a location or locations for partnership activities. Both steps require collaboration and inclusiveness.

The multiple stakeholders who form a partnership often work with different communities, based on geographical location, service boundaries, funding constraints, and other factors. As schools, agencies, and community organizations build collaborative efforts, they cannot assume that all children or families interact with the same agencies and organizations. (If they did, comprehensive strategies might not be necessary.) So, a collaborative partnership must determine which community or communities it will work with and eliminate any barriers that prevent children and families in the community from benefiting from the comprehensive strategies.

To define your target community, consider the following factors:

Are there specific issues such as the concerns of individuals with disabilities, needs of different age groups, or other conditions that can and should be addressed through the partnership?

What physical or geographical boundaries may affect the community, and how?

Are there political, social, or cultural factors to consider? For example, will policies for busing complicate the participation of any populations? Will gang rivalry or a reluctance to cross neighborhood boundaries prevent some residents from participating?

Will non-English-speaking families or families new to this country be afraid to participate in activities located at a school or other official institution?

Does affordable, accessible transportation exist to link your chosen community with the operating sites you have chosen?

Community members are the best source of information about many of these factors, and their input is vital.

Creating Trust and a Shared Vision

In many communities, the partners who join a collaborative group may not have worked together before; they may not even know each other, or they may come from organizations with long histories of conflict and competition. And although diversity among partners gives multiple stakeholders a voice in the comprehensive partnership, it can also mean differences of opinion about issues involving children, youth, and families and the best strategies for addressing them. In order to shape a group of diverse individuals into a focused, trusting, effective partnership, you will need to find common ground and develop a unified vision for success.

Find common ground. Take time to help partners familiarize themselves with each other and with the participating agencies. As discussion develops around general issues affecting children and families, encourage your partners to exchange specific ideas, perceptions, and concerns. Discussion topics may

include:

- how local schools, agencies, and organizations operate;
- what activities each partner conducts, and with whom;
- families' perceptions about education, health care, and human service providers;
- how organizations are funded, how funds are allocated for activities, and how much is spent on each activity; and
- the effect of state and federal policies on agencies' ability to work with children, youth, and families.

Develop a shared vision. For example, a comprehensive partnership in El Paso County, Texas, developed a vision statement focusing on families, schools, and communities. The vision for each of the three groups began with a broad objective--such as, "Schools actively involve families and communities in their operation"--followed by specific goals such as:

- Campuses are open to the community, not just young children and students, for a wide array of child care, educational, health, and social services.
- Service providers, parents, teachers, and administrators . . . share responsibility for education goals as well as the services offered at the school.
- Higher education institutions . . . reach out to rural communities so that student teachers, especially those from the community, can teach in rural community schools and be supervised by university staff.

As you explore perspectives within the group and find common ground, you can begin to shape a vision that will guide your partnership. This process will evolve from discussions to consensus to a final written vision statement that reflects the conditions, interests, and issues of the community's many groups and organizations. The vision statement expresses your partnership's dreams, aspirations, and concerns for children, families, and the community. The vision may include concrete goals, but it also encompasses broader purposes.

Because a shared vision sets the tone and direction for school-linked comprehensive strategies, it's worth investing time in formulating and reviewing your vision. This is an opportunity for you and your partners to think creatively about traditional strategies and to imagine innovative changes.

The process of developing a shared vision is open-ended and exploratory (Kagan, 1994). It requires partners to set aside individual and agency-specific views in favor of a broader, community-wide perspective. The vision statement should reflect the fact that fulfilling the vision will require collaboration among all partners, so they are prepared for the collaborative nature of the path they have chosen.

Tips for Taking Action: First Steps in Formulating a Vision

Visit existing school-linked comprehensive strategies. Arrange for administrators, agency

representatives, school staff, parents, and other partners to visit nearby school-linked programs. Seeing other efforts first-hand brings the concept home and starts creative ideas flowing.

Build shared ownership. Solicit ideas from all participants during the visioning process to promote inclusion. Write down ideas as they emerge to validate the contributions of all participants.

Use a variety of approaches to capture ideas. Remember that some people express themselves better in nonverbal ways. Use pictures, charts, diagrams, and color-coded lists to relay participants' ideas.

Develop resources to support the local effort. Even a contribution of \$150 from a local service club provides something tangible to move the effort forward--for example, postage and printing for flyers or child care for a community meeting.

Building Cultural Awareness

Collaborative groups function most effectively when participants recognize, understand, and value cultural diversity. As you establish guidelines, define a target community, and develop your collective vision, try to learn about the cultures of individuals and groups in the community.

Ethnic groups, organizations, and communities each possess a distinct culture. A group's culture includes the informal rules, beliefs, and practices that guide interaction but are invisible to those outside the culture (Boyd, 1992). Encourage your partners to consider the following questions:

How is each organization's culture reflected in its policies, procedures, and practices and in the beliefs, values, and behavior of its staff?

How might cultural factors affect the way a partner or family participates in comprehensive strategies?

Does each partner organization support collaboration and a focus on children and families, or are these concepts likely to be met with resistance and lack of understanding?

How might the partnerships's goals and vision be affected by cultural factors?

Parents and other community members help the partnership bridge cultural differences and support the home cultures.

Parents and community leaders are valuable sources of information about cultural diversity. They can provide insights into the match (or mismatch) of cultural beliefs, values, and practices between families and institutions. For example, staff involved in a comprehensive partnership may unwittingly contribute to cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding by making direct eye contact (a sign of disrespect in some cultures) or by scheduling appointments on families' religious holidays. Parents can bring these concerns to the attention of other collaborators and suggest solutions that bridge cultural differences.

Learning Opportunities

The process of creating comprehensive strategies offers opportunities for learning at every stage. As collaborators join forces and begin to work together, they need to learn about:

- each other and the community groups, organizations, and agencies that they represent;
- the community and its cultures, assets, and traditions;
- the conditions and strengths of children and families in the community; and
- strategies that have been successful in similar communities and settings.

Collaborative partnerships often bring together individuals with very different knowledge bases, attitudes, and assumptions. Each partner possesses unique knowledge and skills that can benefit the others. As partners organize, plan strategies, and move forward, they create learning opportunities for themselves and each other.

It is tempting for new efforts like comprehensive school-linked strategies to "just do it"--to assess, plan, and organize for action as quickly as possible in order to begin program implementation, leaving "staff development" for a later time. But the time it takes to build knowledge and support is essential if you want partners to reflect on the effort as they develop it and develop a shared understanding of the work they are doing. This is the real work of a partnership: to build a community of learners by allowing different stakeholders to come to consensus and common understanding.

Because developing a partnership is essentially a learning process, it is artificial to separate "professional development," "parent education," and "community involvement" from the rest of the work. This guidebook is organized to promote opportunities for learning in every phase of building the partnership, organizing for action, and maintaining momentum; each of the following chapters will provide suggestions for reflective learning and engagement.

Learning Among Partners

As collaborators initially come together, they need to spend a considerable amount of time learning about each other and the community. For example, school superintendents and heads of other public agencies often do not know each other, despite years of working in the same community. "Horizontal" relationships (among people at the top levels of partner organizations) need to be built, as do relationships that span roles in the community--for example, between parents and agency staff. The goal is to develop a sense of collegiality and common purpose throughout the partnership.

Successful partnerships suggest the following approaches to create learning opportunities for partners:

- **Conduct "cross-learning" exercises** in which each partner tells the others who he or she is and what he or she does.
- **Remember that people learn in different ways**--adults as well as children. Honor different learning styles within the partnership by providing material in many forms, verbal as well as written, and paying attention to the length of meetings so that action-oriented people don't feel frustrated.
- **Use small-group activities to stimulate discussion** between partners and to help parents and

other partners develop personal relationships as well as professional interactions. One partnership holds "pre-meetings" before every partnership session, where parents and community members can learn about meeting protocols and staff can encourage parents to raise the issues that concern them. These meetings give parents a comfortable place to develop leadership skills.

- **Create opportunities for partners to learn about the community.** Many partnerships rotate their meetings among different locations in the community so members can learn about their partners' organizations and clients.
- **Build awareness about collaboration.** Educate partners and the community about the benefits of working together by reaching out to agency administrators, community-based and advocacy organizations, businesses, and religious leaders to explain how comprehensive school-linked strategies work.
- **Make information and ideas accessible to all partners.** Participants frequently leave with varying meanings of what occurred; but partners cannot learn from each other if they do not understand what their collaborators are saying. Effective partnerships teach school and agency partners to avoid technical language and acronyms that may intimidate or confuse other participants. One partnership provides language interpreters at group meetings; the interpreters work with small groups of partners to review and translate documents, so that all participants share the same knowledge base. You may also want to review or "debrief" after meetings. A session to talk about what just happened can help parents and other partners make sure they understand interactions between agency heads or others whose communication styles are different.
- **Build capacity for shared decisionmaking.** Partners may want to adopt a model for group decisionmaking or devise their own approach; either way, all partners must understand and feel comfortable with the process.

A Neutral Meeting Site Can Facilitate Collaboration

An interagency group in Florida initially alternated its monthly meetings between a school and community agency. However, staff from the host agency were interrupted frequently by phone calls and questions. Finally, the group decided to meet at a neutral site: a local community college. This allowed uninterrupted meetings, enabled the group to draw support from the community college, and created the sense of a level playing field among the group members.

Summary

The impetus for forming a collaborative partnership often comes from an individual or a small group of community members seeking answers for a particular problem, or from funding that is available for broad-based change. A core group of planners evolves into a partnership after assessing the context for change and expanding to include additional partners and parents. The governance structure for a collaborative partnership can come from a lead agency, a nonprofit agency created to lead the partnership, or a consortium of agencies.

Partnerships begin planning for action by establishing guidelines for partner relationships, defining a target community, creating trust and shared vision among partners, and building cultural awareness.

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