

Strategy 7: Creating family-school-community partnerships

Action Steps:

- Bring together families, schools, and community organizations in a collaborative effort to meet the comprehensive needs of children, families, and the community
- Open schools beyond traditional school hours and mission to become community learning centers for everyone in the neighborhood
- Cultivate school-business relationships that will benefit both school and business partners and sustain family-involvement programs



Community Schools in New York City

The **Children's Aid Society** (CAS) in New York City has expanded partnering efforts over the last ten years to develop community schools: from an initial site in 1992 to eight additional sites in three neighborhoods serving 10,000 children and their families. Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, the CAS is adding two additional school sites in South Bronx including a full-service neighborhood center (Richard Negron, personal communication, August 20, 2002).

A combination of federal, state, and private funding supports these schools, which while differing structurally and programmatically have created a sense of renewed hope in their communities (Children's Aid Society, 2001, p. 9). One of the newer CAS community schools, an elementary school located in East Harlem, features a unique partnership involving the New York City Board of Education, Children's Aid Society, and Mount Sinai Hospital. The school focuses on comprehensive health prevention and promotion, with particular emphasis on the prevention and treatment of asthma, which affects a "sizable percentage" of the students who attend the school (Children's Aid Society, 2001, p. 38).

Parents were involved in the initial needs assessment process conducted at each CAS community school and are presented on the School Leadership Team, which meets monthly for planning and decision making. In these schools "*parents are treated as partners rather than service recipients*" (Children's Aid Society, 2001, p. 48).

The family resource centers in each school are considered parents' "*first point of access*" to the school, where they are welcome to wait for their children, talk with a teacher, look into adult education opportunities, sign up to volunteer, or use a computer to access their child's homework assignment for the day (Children's Aid Society, 2001, p. 40). "*For many parents, these centers are 'an arena of comfort' in neighborhoods where there is much stress and hardship*" (Agosto, 1999).

External evaluations of these programs have indicated "*a number of tangible accomplishments,*" including improved academic performance; higher attendance rates; the development of positive, safe learning environments; increased parent involvement in "*many ways throughout the school*" (including a "*significant and notable presence*" of parents noted in the schools and teachers rating parent involvement as an asset); and improved student-teacher relationships (Children's Aid Society, 2001, p. 56).

"The sweeping changes that have occurred in families, schools, and communities require educators to collaborate with families and communities if they are to be successful in their primary mission of educating children" (Decker, 2001, p. 45). The Community Schools initiative that has proven successful in some of the most challenging neighborhoods in New York City is one of many partnerships involving schools, families, and community agencies and organizations that are multiplying across the country.

Another successful initiative in New York City is the Beacon School-Based Community Centers program operating in 81 schools, the majority of which are open seven days a week (New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, 2002). These school/community centers offer children, youth, and adults a blend of social services,

recreation, educational and vocational activities, health education, medical referrals, social activities, and community meeting places in a safe environment. In their 1998 survey, Melaville and Blank discovered that school-community initiatives across the country were “skyrocketing” and noted that these collaborations illustrate a “strong sense of direction and shared purpose” among participating schools and agencies, although they are very diverse in terms of design, management, and funding (Mental Health in Schools Training and Technical Assistance Center, *Addressing Barriers*, 1999, p. 6-7).

Benefits of school-family-community collaborations

One of the six **National PTA** standards (*Building Successful Partnerships*, 2000) summarizes the benefits of school-family-community collaborations: “*When schools and communities work together, both are strengthened in synergistic ways and make gains that outpace what either entity could accomplish on its own:*”

- *Families access community resources more easily;*
- *Businesses connect education programs with the realities of the workplace;*
- *Seniors contribute wisdom and gain a greater sense of purpose; and ultimately,*
- *Students serve and learn beyond their school involvement.”*

Studies over the past two decades document that community organizing has contributed to the following changes in schools:

- Upgraded facilities;
- Improved school leadership and staffing;
- Higher quality learning programs;
- New resources and programs; and
- New funding for after-school programs and family supports (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 8)

School-community partnerships have the ability to “weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to enhance caring communities that support all youth and their families and enable success at school and beyond” (Mental Health in Schools Training and Technical Assistance Center, *School-community Partnerships* 1999, p. 2).

The Community School Assessment Checklist can be used by school and community partners to assess supports that are currently available in the school and community as an initial step in planning integrated services (Blank & Langford, 2001). Other useful tools include the Community School Program and Service Checklist and the Community School Funding Source Assessment (Blank & Langford, 2000).

The Syracuse City School District Partnership Policy (excerpt)

The Board of Education of the Syracuse City School District believes that education is the shared responsibility of the students, parents, family, school, and community. Further, the Board recognizes that the academic achievement and success of our students depend on the strength of the partnerships developed among students, parents, families, schools, and the community, from preschool through graduation and beyond.

The Board of Education believes that strong partnerships can be developed through nurturing respect, sharing knowledge, supporting each partner’s role, collaborating on matters of importance, and appreciating the contributions each partner makes to student achievement. Parents and families provide their children with values, supervision and assistance in goal setting. They offer knowledge of their children’s unique histories, traditions, experiences, resources, and challenges. Educators contribute professional dedication, caring, and expertise. The community provides cultural and financial resources, support services, collaboration, and monitoring. Students, who are at the center of these partnerships, bring unique skills, talents, and learning styles, and ultimately are responsible for their own academic achievement.

(Epstein, 2001, p. 332)

Barriers to school-family-community collaborations

Although school-family-community collaborations are proliferating, many school and community programs and services continue to function “in relative isolation from each other,” and conflicts often arise over turf, use of space, confidentiality, and liability when school and community professionals try to collaborate (Mental Health in Schools Training and Technical Assistance Center, *School-community*, 1999, p. 7). Despite its “promising direction” for strengthening families and neighborhoods, partnership building “requires an enlightened vision, creative leadership, and new and multifaceted roles for professionals who work in schools and communities, as well as for all who are willing to assume leadership” (Mental Health in Schools Training and Technical Assistance Center, *School-Community*, 1999, p. ii). School-community partnership development also takes time; partnerships are built “one relationship at a time” and need continual nurturing (Decker, 2001, p. 46). Collaboration also often requires changes in traditional roles, responsibilities, expectations, and schedules, which can prove difficult for partners (U.S. Department of Education, *Keeping*, 1997).

Key Dimensions of School-Community Collaborations:

- 1. Initiation*
- 2. Nature of collaboration*
- 3. Focus*
- 4. Scope of collaboration*
- 5. Scope of potential impact*
- 6. Ownership and governance of programs and services*
- 7. Location of programs and services*
- 8. Degree of cohesiveness among multiple interventions*

(Mental Health in Schools Training and Technical Assistance Center, *School-community partnerships* 1999, p. 2)

Strategies included in this section, which have proven effective in building school-family-community partnerships, are community learning centers, full service/community schools, wraparound services for students who have or are at risk for developing emotional and/or behavioral disabilities, parent training and information centers, and school-business partnerships.

Community learning centers

Community learning centers “extend the concept of public education beyond the traditional K-12 program and are not limited by traditional school schedules and roles. Community schools are open schools, available for use before and after school for academic, co-curricular, recreational, health, social service, and workforce-preparation programs for all ages” (Decker, 2001, p. 45). “Keeping school doors open during nontraditional school hours provides students, parents, and the community with access to valuable educational resources” (U.S. Department of Education, *Keeping*, 1997). Schools may be used during these nonschool hours to serve families in a variety of ways: for community meetings, adult education, local theatrical productions, candidate forums, health screenings, and physical fitness classes, for instance (U.S. Department of Education, *Keeping*, 1997).

A community learning center can also serve as an after-school and summer learning environment for children where they are safe and supervised. Programs offered in these centers include tutoring and mentoring; drug and violence prevention; youth-focused activities (Boys and Girls Clubs, etc.); computer instruction; language instruction; employment preparation or training; and supervised recreation and athletic programs (U.S. Department of Education, *Keeping*, 1997).

A successful public-private partnership in New York City has created a comprehensive after-school program at Washington Irving High School that has given students “enhanced opportunities to explore their interests, connect with the community, and form positive relationships with adults (Durkin & Jarney, 2001, p. 50). In 1994, the 14th Street-Union Square Local Development Corporation formed a partnership with the school that has resulted in a “culture of raised expectations, improved self-esteem and increased academic achievement” at the school. In 2000, aided by a grant from The After School Corporation, the partnership created a diverse after-school program for educational enrichment that includes a range of corporate and not-for-profit support from the surrounding neighborhood. For example, Con Edison, a local utility company, sponsors an after-school robotics team where students work with professional engineers. Similarly, the after-school drama team works closely with the nearby Vineyard Theater, giving students experience working with professional playwrights, producers, and directors. Program Director Jenny Bailey indicated that 450 students (about 20% of the student population) participate in the after-school clubs, which are an extension of the school’s curriculum and give students an opportunity to work in smaller groups and benefit from more individualized attention (personal communication, August 21, 2002). An “After-School Showcase” is held periodically, giving students an opportunity to demonstrate to their families what they are learning.

Full-service/community schools

Full-service schools, also referred to as community schools, act as “one-stop centers where the educational, physical, psychological, and social” needs of families are met in a holistic approach (Dryfoos, 1996). These schools “combine the best quality educational practices with a wide range of vital in-house health and social services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally, and socially prepared to learn” (Samberg & Sheeran, 2000, p. 30). For children, teachers, and parents alike, this approach ensures that “help is often just a step away” (Children’s Aid Society, 2001).

A community school is “both a set of partnerships and a place where services, supports, and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities” (Samberg & Sheeran, 2000, p. iv). In a community school the various partners are “not conducting business as usual. They are working together toward common results; changing their funding patterns; transforming the practice of their staffs; and working creatively and respectfully with youth, families, and residents to create a different kind of institution” (Coalition of Community Schools, 2000). Community schools offer families “many avenues for involvement,” including opportunities to serve on planning and advisory boards, volunteer in schools, and be hired as teachers’ aides and outreach workers (Dryfoos, 2002, p. 11).

Although community schools have been referred to as “schools of the future,” the economic, social, and technological changes that are taking place all around us indicate that the future is already here. Community schools are schools for today because they offer a comprehensive response to the needs of 21st century children and their families. With their emphasis on providing students with extended learning opportunities, bringing together the key developmental influences in children’s lives — families, communities, and schools — and providing essential supports, protection, guidance, and opportunities, community schools are designed to help all students develop into productive adults who are able to earn a decent living, become responsible family members, and contribute to the larger society through good citizenship. (Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 27)

No two full-service or community schools are exactly alike, although they share similar characteristics (Dryfoos, 2002). “A wide range of models and approaches can fit into a basic community school framework” (Samberg & Sheeran, 2000, p. iv). The most common services offered are medical and dental care, mental health, and social services, although one school that was having difficulty involving parents discovered that the service they most needed was access to a laundromat since none existed in the neighborhood. The school installed two washing machines and dryers in the basement of the school, which both families and teachers began utilizing. Before long, “parents and teachers got to know one another by chatting over the washing machines” (Dryfoos, 2002).

Successful programs require a full-time coordinator or program director, “who builds a team of personnel sensitive to the issues related to youth development, cultural diversity, and community empowerment” (Dryfoos, 1996). The director “oversees the delivery of an array of supports provided by local agency partners and participates on the management team for the school” (Samberg & Sheeran, 2000, p. iv). Bilingual staff may also be essential in many locations.

Although evaluations of full-service schools have been inconclusive thus far, gains have been documented in student achievement, attendance, reduction in suspensions, reduction in high-risk behaviors, better access to services, increased parental involvement, and safer neighborhoods (Dryfoos, 2002). Full-service schools have been especially beneficial for students with disabilities because of their emphasis on prevention and early intervention, integration of services that support total well-being of students, and easy access to comprehensive services and specialists (Warger, 2001).

Wraparound services

School-community collaboration is especially crucial for students who have or are at risk for emotional and behavioral disabilities. These students have a more than 50% dropout rate and many enter the justice system after they leave (Huff, 1999). The wraparound process allows families, schools, and community teams to come together for “realistic problem-solving and creative planning” (Eber, 1999, p. 10).

Wraparound brings teachers, families, and community representatives together with a commitment to a family-centered, strength-based process. This results in the creation of unique services that support the student as well as the family, teacher, and other caregivers. Supports and services found in wraparound plans may include respite, mentors, peer supports, parent partners, and assistance for families in need of basic supports such as housing, transportation, job assistance, childcare, and health and safety supports. (Eber, 1999, p. 10)

A “key element” in this process is families, students, and professionals “reaching consensus on the outcomes they want to achieve” (Eber, 1999, p. 10). The community can play a vital role in the success of these programs, for example, in providing incentives (gift certificates, event passes, etc.) that can be used to reinforce student efforts.

Parent Training and Information Centers

Funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education, Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) are located in every state and U.S. territory. PTIs assist parents of children birth to 21 with disabilities and special needs. Each center is part of or its own independent not-for-profit organization. Together, PTIs form a national network of more than 100 centers that provide valued services, including information and referral, educational advocacy, training for parents and professionals, outreach and special events, libraries, and publications.

An important goal of all PTIs is to improve communication between parents of children with disabilities and special needs and the school personnel who work with their children. PTIs work to achieve this goal in many ways, including holding workshops for parents and professionals on topics such as parent and student rights, special education services, how the school system works, and home/school communication. PTI staff also work directly with parents and schools to obtain the most appropriate education for students with disabilities. All PTIs can refer parents to a wide range of resources in their communities, including after-school programs, camps and summer programs, tutoring, early intervention services, and much more.

School-business partnerships

School-business partnerships “are a long-established means of working with the community, and they continue to be fertile ground for improving programs offered by schools” (Dietz, 1997, p. 122). The typical ways that businesses support schools are through donations of voluntary labor and funding. Some employees serve as adult mentors for students and provide encouragement and support, especially for students with limited family involvement at home. Employees may also invite students to accompany them to work for a day to job-shadow, giving them an opportunity to learn about potential careers and the expectations of the workplace. Further, these workplaces can serve as school-to-work sites for secondary students to gain on-the-job experiences. Businesses and community agencies may also collaborate on service learning projects that engage students in a business or community-related project as part of their coursework.

School-business collaborations result in businesses gaining “a work force that’s prepared and ready for the world of work” because the businesses have been involved in helping to prepare students through opportunities such as mentoring, apprenticeship, and service learning programs (Dietz, 1997, p. 125). Other tangible benefits to business partners may include:

- research assistance using school resources or personnel
- student volunteer assistance through service learning programs
- recruitment of future employees through student career and mentoring activities
- student artwork and decorations
- student performances
- access to school recreation and exercise facilities
- free advertising in the school newspaper
- student and faculty art assistance (Dietz, 1997; Dodd & Konzal, 2002)

Strategies businesses can utilize to support home-school-community partnerships include:

- creating and adopting “family-friendly” policies (paid time off, flex time, “lunchtime flex,” part-time employment, job sharing, and other arrangements) to encourage family participation in school activities;
- supporting employees who are parents through worksite programs (parent support groups, lunchtime parenting seminars, literacy training, etc.);
- working to improve child care and schools through internal and community programs (child care resources, in-kind donations, and *pro bono* consulting to schools, etc.);
- working with schools to help them better meet the needs of employed parents (“employee-friendly” scheduling of school events, family resource centers, translation of materials into native languages, etc.); and
- supporting and sustaining family involvement strategies that prove effective. (U.S. Department of Education, 1995; Ballen & Moles, 1994)

The Center Without Walls

The **Center Without Walls** (CWW) program helps parents of children with disabilities or other special needs connect with programs and services for their children and themselves. A bilingual, mobile access team takes information, training, and advocacy services to community-based organizations serving immigrant, minority, and at-risk families in New York City. CWW provides on-the-spot information about schools, educational and related services, family and community resources, and respite programs. Parents can use CWW’s traveling library to access the program’s comprehensive database of programs and services.

The Center Without Walls’ multilingual Access Team provides training and helps parents in English, Spanish, Haitian, Creole, and Chinese. They can also link parents to sources of help in many other languages.

The Center Without Walls is a joint project of two Parent Training and Information Centers, Resources for Children with Special Needs, Inc. and Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., both located in New York City.