On the Same Page: School-Community Partnerships in Urban Settings

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In the era of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and *Waiting for Superman*, it is clear that our nation is keenly focused on the academic achievement of students in urban schools. At the same time, the economy is in flux, having been rocked by a recession whose effects have been widespread. Urban schools in every state are struggling to provide a globally-competitive education to their students, and are often attempting to do so with fewer resources than their suburban counterparts. In my work, I have observed schools endeavor to meet students’ needs (both academic and social) by partnering with local community organizations. These partnerships have achieved varying degrees of success, defined as the extent to which their mutually agreed-upon goals were met. This variance in success inspired my own curiosity about what practices each party can engage in to create and maintain a mutually beneficial partnership that ultimately serves the best interests of students.

In this paper, I will define the terms used within (such as “urban” and “partnership”), then offer a review of the literature on school-community partnerships in urban settings. I will discuss the reasons why schools and community organizations partner, and note the challenges of such collaborations. I will then proceed to explain the criteria I used for evaluating the practices used within school-community partnerships, and illustrate the best practices that emerged from my review of the literature. I will conclude by describing the implications of my findings, and their impact on my practice as an educator and community partner.

**Terms and Definitions**

The definition of “urban” varies depending on the context in which it is used. The definition I will use in this paper comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, which defines the urbanicity of a school based on the population density of the surrounding area (2002). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an area can be defined as “urban” if it has a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile, and surrounding areas (Census blocks) have at least 500 people per square mile (“Urban and Rural Classification,” para. 1).

I borrow Sanders’ (2001) definition of “partnership” in stating that a school-community partnership is comprised of “the connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (20). Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) state that school-community partnership commonalities include: bringing together people, groups, and organizations for collective action on behalf of young people; having a mission and goals centered on improving young people’s well-being; incorporating positive youth development theory and practice; engaging schools as key partners; and relying on and building social capital (4). The same authors categorize partnerships as collaborative (interdependent) or coordinative (no interdependence), and adult-led (adults have power and authority) or youth-led (youth have power and authority), groupings I think should be considered when assessing a partnership.

Ellis and Hughes (2002) define “meaningful involvement” in the context of school-community partnerships as: parents and staff taking an active interest in a child’s well-being, staff taking an interest in the well-being of a child’s family, respecting and valuing families’ funds of knowledge, empowering parents to take on multiple roles to support their children (i.e., parents as teachers, advocates, decision-makers), and extending “meaningful involvement” to include activities that take place outside of school (5). As partnerships differ in different contexts, I believe meaningful involvement can and should vary according to setting and stakeholders involved.

“Collaboration” is another term that necessitates a clearer definition, in the interest of better understanding what partnering and meaningful involvement entail. Daka-Mulwanda (1995) cites Kagan (1991) in defining collaborative settings as places “where resources, power, and authority are shared and where people are brought together to achieve common goals that could not be accomplished by a single individual or organization independently” (p. 3). Daka-Mulwanda uses Bruner’s (1991) three elements of collaboration to further articulate what collaboration entails: jointly developing and agreeing to a set of common goals and directions; sharing responsibility for obtaining the defined goals; and working together to achieve those goals, using the expertise of each collaborator.

In my review of the literature, the term “community” has proven difficult to define. Sanders (2001) defines the term as “social interactions that can occur within or transcend local boundaries” (Nettles, 1991b, p. 380; 20). Various authors include business owners, parents, religious organizations, nonprofit organizations, local government leaders, and members of the media in their understanding of community. As with meaningful participation, the definition of the term “community” will necessarily vary, depending on context.

**Why Do Schools and Community Organizations Partner?**

Schools and community organizations choose to partner for a variety of reasons, both academic and social in nature. Crowson and Boyd (1993) state that stakeholders who choose to partner with one another share three core assumptions: the first being that school, family, and community are interconnected; the second, that education is an investment in children; and the third, that school-community partnerships are needed for children to develop healthfully (144). Sanders (2001) cites Epstein’s (1987) theory of overlapping spheres as a reason to partner; if young people are influenced by their schools, their families, and their communities, these entities must join forces in order to provide comprehensive services. In defense of involving community organizations, Heath and McLaughlin (1987) state that student academic success requires resources outside of families and schools (Sanders, 2001). Toffler and Toffler (1995) argue that when schools partner with community organizations, such partnerships increase an element of care in an environment (the school) that is not always caring (Sanders, 2001). Sanders and Harvey (2000) posit that partnerships can aid schools in meeting reform goals (Sanders, 2001). On a practical level, WestEd (2007) states that partnerships can conserve costs for all entities involved.

School-community partnerships have the potential to benefit different stakeholders in different ways. Butcher (2003) points to several benefits for community members who partner with young people, including: perceiving young people as legitimate contributors, increased feelings of effectiveness and confidence in working with youth, and a greater understanding of the needs of young people (42). For students involved in partnerships, Fletcher (2005) argues that they experience a greater interest in academics, higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and a sense of ownership within their schools and communities (9). School systems can benefit from partnerships through increased funding, greater support of student involvement, stronger relationships between adults and students, and a better school climate (Fletcher, 2005). Hall (2008) posits that partnerships allow educators to get an “inside view” into students’ lives from parents and from students themselves, as well as a chance to use students’ experiences to create culturally responsive curricula. Parents can benefit from school-community partnerships through getting to share in an important experience with their children, and from being empowered to engage in democracy and power sharing with schools (Hall, 2008). Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) point to the contagion effect as a reason to partner: when partnerships are successful, good news spreads quickly, and new partners may be encouraged join, garnering further community support of the partnership.

**Literature Review**

Crowson and Boyd (1993) noted that because institutions such as schools and community organizations are viewed in terms of their deficiencies, partnerships between the two are seen from a deficit perspective. The authors based their work on three assumptions: the interconnection of schools, families, and communities; education as an investment in young people; and the need for effective child development through school-community partnerships. Crowson and Boyd cited Kirst (1991) in listing various barriers to partnerships, such as: professional preparation, state legal and procedural restrictions, turf battles, information system weaknesses, leadership gaps, the “politics” of coordination, and school-to-community credibility. Given these barriers, the authors recommended using both stakeholder and integrative approaches to improve the partnership between school and community, defining who is considered a professional, assessing how much support is needed to start and sustain the partnership, and determining who governs which aspects of the partnership.

Butcher (2003) offered Youth as Resources (YAR) as an exemplar of youth-adult partnerships. Through YAR, youth and adults convene as equal partners in addressing a community issue or providing a beneficial service to an organization or cause in over 22 states nationwide. Butcher shared that YAR is based on three principles: youth-adult partnerships, youth-led service, and youth in governance through grant making (40). As YAR members, youth and adults engage in “reciprocal mentoring” where each party guides the other through sharing their unique skills and knowledge. Butcher argued that adults must address their hesitation to give young people meaningful opportunities to demonstrate social responsibility through partnerships with youth.

The Coalition for Community Schools (2007) suggested the community school model as one way for schools and community members and organizations to partner. The Coalition posits that community schools, while different in design, focus on developing programs and services in five key areas: quality education, youth development, family support, family and community engagement, and community development (76). The author(s) pointed to data showing higher academic achievement, increases in youth development assets, rise family well-being, and a decrease in community violence in community schools across the country. Nine community schools were highlighted; each utilized partnerships with community members, local organizations, and universities to offer additional resources and services to students and their families.

Daka-Mulwanda, Thornburg, Filbert, and Klein (1995) reviewed 58 reports commissioned by various foundations, councils, and government agencies, all of which focused their recommendations towards youth and their families. The authors found that collaboration arose as a theme within these reports, including horizontal partnerships (groups at one level of power working together, such as at the local level) and vertical partnerships (groups spanning different levels of power working together, such as the state level working with the local level). Four recommendations were made: collaborate vertically (especially at the federal and state level), collaborate horizontally (specifically at the local level), set education as a priority within a community, and prepare youth for employment. The authors went on to describe the following factors that must be considered when engaging in collaboration: “turf” issues, multilevel systems, leadership, funding, location, the roles of parents and youth, the needs of various ethnic groups, confidentiality, and lack of common terminology.

DaSilva Iddings (2009) discussed school-community partnerships through the lens of literacy, specifically as it pertains to recently immigrated students and their families. She offers the example of an elementary school where she created a Welcome Center for this demographic of her community. The author sought out community members and students to work in the center, as well as recently immigrated families to participate in and lead activities (such as teaching Spanish classes). The center engaged parents and students through discussions of their daily lives, sharing folktales and oral histories, and cooking (all of which took place in English and Spanish), with the parents as both generators and recipients of knowledge. Teachers at the school reported gaining a greater understanding of students and their families, and began to view bilingualism as an asset. Parents viewed the Welcome Center as a gateway to understanding the public school system in the United States. Ultimately, the center served as a means of serving a disenfranchised population within the school setting.

On behalf of Creating Communities of Learning & Excellence, Ellis and Hughes (2002) created a handbook for educators who seek to meaningfully involve family and community members as partners in the context of education. The authors advocate for the inclusion of parents and community members in decisions that affect instruction, programs, and problem-solving. Ellis and Hughes provide activities for educators to reflect on their assumptions about “hard to reach” students and their families, understanding the school in the context of its community, and assessing school climate. Questions are also included for students to discuss how they would want their parents involved in their schools, at various age levels. This report offers a multitude of tools for creating, implementing, and assessing partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

On behalf of The Freechild Project and the HumanLinks Foundation, Fletcher (2005) authored a handbook on involving students meaningfully in school change. Fletcher argued that student voice is at the heart of meaningful involvement; often, students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge or decisions that affect them. The author cited Hart’s (1994) ladder of student involvement as a way to measure how meaningfully young people are involved in school change efforts. Fletcher posits that students can contribute meaningfully as school researchers, educational planners, classroom teachers, learning evaluators, systemic decision-makers, education advocates, and organizers for school change; he shared examples of how students have assumed these roles in schools across the country.

Gretz (2003) used his experience at a neighborhood academy to suggest best practices for school-community partnerships. The author believes that the most critical aspect of an emerging partnership is the planning phase, where vision, mission, and goals must be aligned. Gretz contends that one individual must oversee such a partnership, and cites Decker and Decker (2001) in stating that the principal of the school is best suited for this responsibility. Gretz noted the importance of assessment, suggesting portfolios, murals, and surveys as ways for students, educators, and community members to express their feedback regarding the partnership. The author maintains the importance of data collection in lending credibility to a partnership, thus positively impacting its sustainability.

Hall (2008) drew from his involvement in an afterschool program called Project Safe, where middle school students were invited to engage in dialogue about their lives outside of school. Hall, two teachers, and three parents facilitated these discussions, being careful not to create a power differential between adults and young people as they sought to maintain an equitable environment. Hall described young people creating curricular topics and the adult facilitators creating questions and activities based on their input. The author stated numerous benefits derived from the program: adults got an “insider’s look” into students’ lives, the gap between school and community began to be bridged, parents were afforded a chance to share in an experience that mattered to their children, and Hall himself reconsidered and learned about his role as an educator. Project Safe appears to have set the foundation for deepened relationships and heightened trust between students, their families, and educators at the school.

Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) presented a multisite study of five school-community partnerships in New York. The authors noted that each partnership looked different, as each served distinct populations in varied contexts. Lawson et al. categorized the partnerships as either collaborative (partners as interdependent on one another) or coordinative (limited interdependence) and adult-led (adults hold most or all of the power and authority) or youth-led (youth as authoritative and powerful). The authors ultimately posited that youth-led partnerships offer vast opportunities for new processes within partner organizations. Solid infrastructure and strong leadership (especially strong school leadership) were noted as key factors of successful initiatives.

Leistyna (2002) examined one school district’s effort to address its rising drop-out rate and involve parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds more meaningfully. The district formed a multicultural steering committee which sought to engage a more diverse group of parents through information packets, partnerships with local organizations, and creating a Parent Access Center to offer resources to families. The author explained that though the committee’s efforts were well-intentioned, it failed to critically assess the complex ways in which power affects the everyday lives of students, educators, community members, and families. Notably, the committee did not engage students or the elderly in its work, nor did it participate in neighborhood ethnography of the spaces students inhabit before and after school.

Nagel and Guest (2007) interviewed Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, leading researcher in the field of family-school-community partnerships, and discussed the relevance and implications of her work. Epstein noted eight essential elements of successful partnerships that her research has uncovered: leadership, teamwork, action plans, implementation of plans, funding, collegial support, evaluation, and networking. She also referenced her model of overlapping spheres of influence (home, school, and community), explaining that each sphere directly affects student success in school. Epstein pointed to the need for more thorough education within pre-service and in-service teacher programs, as well as greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners, to advance the field of family-school-community partnerships.

Sanders (2001) analyzed survey data from over 400 National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) to document community partners, identify the focus of partnerships, identify obstacles, and examine school satisfaction with the quantity and quality of their partnerships. The author discovered that in terms of their focus, partnerships generally fell into four categories: family-centered, student-centered, school-centered, or community-centered, with the majority of partnerships being student-centered. Sanders found that schools with more partners reported being happier with the quantity of partnership activities, and schools who were satisfied with the quantity and quality of partnership activities generally felt more supported in their partnership efforts. Interestingly, urban schools reported having fewer partners than desired, but they also reported greater satisfaction with the quality of their partnership activities.

Wimer, Post, and Little (2003) cited Ferguson and Dickens (1999) in identifying four forms of resources necessary for community organizations to achieve their goals: physical resources (such as meeting space), financial resources (funding), social resources (shared norms and trust), and intellectual resources (stakeholder knowledge) [15]. In their review of evaluations of 15 afterschool programs (specifically, ones that take place in public schools but are operated by community-based organizations), the authors described numerous strategies for using such resources to benefit school-community partnerships. For example, in regards to utilizing physical resources, the authors noted the importance of creating a written memorandum of understanding for shared space, so stakeholder expectations are clearly defined.

In their brief, WestEd (2007) made multiple policy recommendations on the county, state, and federal level regarding how best to support school-community partnerships. Recommendations of note include staff development on the county level; WestEd suggested combining part-time positions within multiple collaborating agencies to create full-time positions with benefits, so as to entice and retain staff. WestEd also addressed the need for more effective and efficient transportation in the form of buses or vans through redirecting funding for such services at the state and federal level.

**Challenges of Partnering**

As the literature implies, numerous challenges inhibit school-community partnerships. Generally speaking, Crowson and Boyd (1993) cite Kirst’s (1991) barriers to partnerships as including insufficient professional development, state legal and procedural restrictions, “turf” battles (schools and community organizations often benefit from maintaining their geographic or demographic arenas, and from the status quo that comes with such maintenance), weak systems for storing and sharing data, gaps in leadership, and issues of trust and credibility between organizations.

Ellis and Hughes (2002) list a number of challenges for parents who wish to partner with schools and community organizations, including: lack of time, transportation, and childcare; language barriers; lack of culturally appropriate practices on the part of the school or community organization; previous negative experiences with schools; lack of clarity regarding how to contribute; and parents who are simply struggling to meet their families’ basic needs (37).

Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) note that not all educators are automatically prepared to be partners. From the perspective of teachers and school administrators, partnerships are labor and resource intensive, and can be seen as a nuisance, especially when there is a focus on measurable improvement as it pertains to school reform. Existing roles as well as staff turnover can negatively affect emerging partnerships, in addition to the fear of public scrutiny from outside the school. Sanders (2001) points out that teachers and administrators may engage in deficit-based thinking about community members and organizations, rendering themselves blind to the assets that these stakeholders offer.

Butcher (2003) offers a compelling quote from the perspective of a young person involved in a school-community partnership:

“It is of utmost importance that young people feel that their voice matters, but it is of even greater importance that their voice *does* matter! It’s time adults moved from patting young people on the head for having “cute little ideas” and actually begin listening to them. My generation will be in control mere decades from now and voting even sooner than that.” (Hira, 2001)

In this vein, Ellis and Hughes (2002) remind readers that because students are not regularly offered meaningful roles in their schools and communities, they may refuse to engage in partnerships when opportunities arise, or they may test adults’ boundaries or simply parrot what others say when involved in partnerships.

**Evaluating Partnership Practices**

Keeping these barriers to school-community partnerships in mind, I sought to identify criteria by which to judge a potential best practice for partnering. The first criterion I identified was context: is the practice specific to a certain population or locale that would limit its applicability? The second criterion I recognized was feasibility: can this practice be implemented with reasonably accessible resources? The third criterion I decided on was purpose: does this practice ultimately benefit the diverse population of youth, schools, and community members being served? These three criteria ultimately guided my decision whether or not to include each practice in the following section.

**Best Practices for School-Community Partnerships**

Having defined terms, reviewed literature, recognized barriers, and identified criteria for inclusion, I will now speak to best practices found in research for school-community partnerships. I pinpointed four categories of best practices within the literature: including students and parents as stakeholders; defining clear roles, tasks, and scope; combining resources and data; and offering professional development and other incentives. In each category, I have included a number of practices that the literature has shown to be effective in bolstering school-community relations; while most of the practices are aimed at ground-level change, some practices are geared towards the county, state, or federal level. In regards to the criteria I applied to choosing each practice, feasibility may look different from county to county, given, for example, a county’s resource base.

**Include Students and Parents as Stakeholders**

A number of authors pointed to the fact that although school-community partnership activities involve or affect both students and their parents, partnerships do not always recognize these two groups as stakeholders. Butcher (2003) offers several tips for partnering with young people, taken from Garza & Stevens (2002): include youth-friendly training on how partnerships work, establish a safe and supportive atmosphere for sharing concerns, empower youth to take leadership roles (such as through facilitating partnership meetings), provide opportunities for reflection on contributions, and make decisions by consensus (44). Fletcher (2005) identifies numerous roles for meaningful student involvement, including: students as school researchers, classroom teachers, learning evaluators, systemic decision-makers, and organizers for school change (11). Overall, the authors advocate for thinking outside of traditional roles for student involvement in school-community partnerships.

Ellis and Hughes (2002) list ways to engage parents in school-community partnerships: hold a welcome conference; maintain regular communication through phone calls, notes, newsletters, and home visits; and use the school as a community center (for example, by hosting public meetings and enrichment classes specifically geared towards parents) [7]. The Coalition for Community Schools (2007) argues that providing resources for parents, such as English language and literacy classes, brown bag lunch events, health services, college classes, recreation classes, and childcare, are critical components of community schools. These strategies serve to increase parents’ comfort with the school setting, provide valuable resources for families, and offer points of entry for parents to get involved in school-community partnership activities.

Importantly, Leistyna (2002) reminds readers that school-community partnerships (specifically those involving parents) are based in a system of power that privileges some cultures and languages to others. For example, Leistyna observes that school-community partnership meetings and written communications are primarily conducted in English, a language that parents may not be comfortable communicating in. A key question Leistyna offers is, who decides which concerns and issues are noteworthy to a partnership committee? Ultimately, the partnership committee decides what it will focus on, and if that committee does not include parents and students, their voices may be lost.

**Define Clear Roles, Tasks, and Scope**

A second best practice involves having a clear understanding of partnership roles, tasks to be completed, and the scope of the partnership. Crowson & Boyd (1993) recommend identifying a leader or coordinator to helm the partnership; Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) posit that school leaders can serve as core partnership guides. WestEd (2007) argues that creating a formal organization with formalized roles is critical to success. To formalize the partnership, Crowson and Boyd (1993) advocate for written agreements that outline carefully defined tasks and each party’s contributions, ground rules for participation, and processes to address conflict. Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) offer the idea of using work groups or committees to get work done without needing all partners present.

To determine the scope of the partnership, Sanders (2001) recommends utilizing yearly action plans and linking partnership activities to school improvement goals to establish a focused mission. As a partnership is emerging Crowson and Boyd (1993) call for an assessment of the support threshold, which is to say, asking how much support is needed to start up and sustain a partnership. To this end, the authors advocate for assessing risk before beginning a partnership.

**Combine Resources and Data**

A benefit of school-community partnerships is the widened range of resources each partner gains access to when collaborating with others. Wimer, Post, and Little (2003) identify four types of resources (physical, financial, social, and intellectual), as well as strategies for partners to share these resources. In regards to physical resources, the authors recommend creating written agreements about use of space, as well as checklists to monitor the condition of shared space. For financial resources, the authors encourage sharing dedicated afterschool program funding, school district funding, in-kind donations to strengthen the partnership. Sharing social resources can include creating formal liaison positions between schools and community organizations, and holding special events to build relationships between stakeholders. Intellectual resources may include involving outside experts, or community-based organizations offering support to teachers and school staff.

WestEd (2007) notes the importance of having a comprehensive data collection and evaluation strategy within a school-community partnership. This may pose a challenge to partners, as different organizations have differing requirements for collecting and sharing data. WestEd (2007) recommends policy change at the county level; if existing rules around data sharing are prohibitive, policymakers are urged to adjust them accordingly. Both WestEd (2007) and Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko (2007) acknowledge the important role that a neutral third party can play in a partnership. These authors argue that an intermediary organization can offer technical assistance, advice and act as a bridge between partners.

**Offer Professional Development and Other Incentives**

Potential partners may not have a working knowledge of school-community partnerships, nor may they understand how they can benefit from partnering with other stakeholders. A number of authors speak to the power of professional development and incentivizing participation in engaging partners. Crowson and Boyd (1993) and Sanders (2001) both recommend training school staff thoroughly on what partnerships are to better prepare educators for working with community members. Sanders (2001) notes the strategy of offering food, door prizes, and childcare as incentives for participation, as well as holding partnership activities on both weekends and weekdays to engage working parents, teachers, and community members. In regards to policy, WestEd (2007) states that at the county level, full-time positions need to be created by combining part-time positions within collaborating agencies; at the state level, funding streams must be reorganized to ensure professional development opportunities for multiple stakeholders.

**Implications**

Although the literature I reviewed was highly informative, further research is needed to enhance how educators, community members, and students understand and contribute to school-community partnerships. I believe that more scholarship that considers the student perspective on partnering with schools and community organizations is needed; research questions addressing how young people view themselves as partners could offer insight to the field. Another area that I noted a lack of scholarship in is the possibilities of sharing stories of partnership success with other stakeholders, or even with other communities. Some of the literature I reviewed referenced the need to share stories of success, but few tangible practices were given to expound on this idea. I believe that research in both of these areas would strongly benefit how school-community partnerships are enacted.

As both an educator and community partner, I am taking away a few key points from reviewing the literature on school-community partnerships. The importance of clear and honest communication (written and verbal, as well as culturally sensitive) stands out as a critical component of effective partnering. In one manner or another, each author referenced the need for communication practices and systems that enable the exchange of ideas between stakeholders. Another key point I noted was the importance of shared leadership and stakeholder buy-in, elements that may prove difficult to achieve when different agendas and motives are in play. A third point that struck me was the need to view parents, families, and communities as assets, not simply as peripheral extensions of students’ lives. It is clear in the literature that families and communities offer a wealth of knowledge and resources that can benefit students both academically and socially. As I move into my role managing a school-community partnership between a nonprofit organization and a high school, I am committed to keeping all of these practices in mind, and enacting those that are context-appropriate to the best of my ability.

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