
Providing Community Supports and Resources

Center on Innovation & Improvement

The community can be a great resource for school improvement. By enlisting municipal offices in support of its improvement efforts, a district can create a broad base of community support for, and understanding of, dramatic measures such as restructuring when they become necessary. Case studies and other research provide evidence of myriad types of community supports and resources being utilized by schools and districts.

Partners can include large corporations and small businesses, law enforcement, health departments, universities, faith-based and other non-profit organizations, senior citizens, and parents, among others. Some schools have formed beneficial alliances with municipal officials and the media (Brooks, 2009). Benefits provided range from providing extra adults who listen to children read (Doiron & Lees, 2009) to donated funds or goods. One example of community support connects chronically absent students with community mentors and has measurably reduced students' chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). In other examples, grants provided funds to hire a school nurse and social worker to attend to students' physical, social, and emotional needs and to help involve parents; church volunteers organized a mentoring program (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009); and rural schools benefited from working with community-based and faith-based organizations who provided tutoring and other after-school programs. Connecting with the community can help high school students engage and see the relevance of their coursework (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007), and evidence shows that students with disabilities benefit greatly from community employment experience during the high school years (e.g., work-study jobs, paid work experiences, and high school vocational education experiences; Stodden et al., 2001).

Cultural, linguistic, and social gaps often exist between schools and the students and families they serve; community groups or individuals, such as paraprofessionals or teachers from the school's neighborhood, may serve as bridging intermediaries to foster more productive relationships (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Reed, 2009; Warren, 2007). During a restructuring effort, Chicago worked to engage the community productively by initiating partnerships with grassroots organizations that helped parents understand why reform was necessary in their children's schools.

Educators desiring effective partnerships are advised to prioritize the process, permit time for development, and promote community ownership (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). One study indicated that the majority of the partnerships in studied schools were teacher-initiated, with articulated needs based on a determination of students' and programs' needs. Processes used to develop the partnerships, such as networking, meetings in person, and the negotiation of partnership activities themselves created "win-win" relationships for the school and the community partner (Hands, 2005).

Action Principles

For District

1. Include municipal and civic leaders, community and faith-based organizations, and parent groups in school reform and restructuring planning; maintain regular communication with them.
2. Assist school leaders in networking with potential partners and in developing partnerships.
3. Provide professional development for school leaders regarding effective collaboration.
4. Direct extra resources to support innovative partnerships between community partners and schools and allow the kind of flexibility in policies that partnerships may require.

For School

1. Assess areas of need and identify potential community partners who might address needs.
2. Allow time for school leaders to meet partners in person and develop "win-win" relationships.

3. Negotiate partnership activities, communicate regularly with partners, publicly recognize partners, and continuously evaluate partnerships for continuous improvement and sustained relationships.
4. Recognize and support the bridging role that local teachers and staff members may play.

References and Resources

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- See also archives of the School Community Journal at: www.families-schools.org