Partnerships Build Healthy Communities

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How can partnerships best be developed to ensure the success of service-learning projects? In a critique of service-learning practice, Brown (2001) observed that many projects are constructed in "relative isolation" and "tend to be primarily concerned with individual student educational outcomes ... The benefits to community are often secondary concerns" (p. 4).

Why Partnerships?

Such an approach fails to capitalize on the benefits students gain from working with community partners. Obviously, community organizations have resources and technical capacity that most schools lack. Also, local organizations provide expertise on local issues. This point is essential, as "many educators [feel they could determine community needs themselves, without the help of partners" (Bailis & Melchior, 2004). Partner-ships are particularly useful in helping educators to respond to the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse students (Carnegie Foundation, 1988). Similarly, partnerships can play a crucial role in presenting youth with adult role models or mentors — a key component of successful service-learning projects. Positive relationships with caring adult mentors has been associated with reduction in risky behaviors and increased academic performance and attendance (Neal et al., 2009).

Challenges

Establishing the value of partnerships is but one step toward flourishing collaboration, however. A number of obstacles must be navigated first. Fundamentally, schools and agencies represent two radically different cultures. Often, community partners become frustrated by schools that are inflexible and bureaucratic. Schools and their partners approach the relationship from different places with different goals, priorities, capacities, and needs (Roehlkepartain & Bailis, 2007), and while

organizations define success by the accomplishment of certain tasks, schools determine success as meeting particular academic standards. Such cultural differences mean that partnerships can be time-consuming to form, and they take knowledge, interpersonal skills, and resources to sustain (Bailis & Melchior, 2004). If not done well, partnerships for service-learning can discourage participants, thus undermining the impact of the service-learning effort (Roehlkepartain & Bailis, 2007).

Achieving Mutual Benefits

How do schools and their partners tap into benefits of partnerships while at the same time avoiding pitfalls? Good channels of communication are a prerequisite. Schools and organizations do not necessarily need to share goals, but they need to communicate them clearly. Schools should communicate their definition of service-learning and the academic and curricular standards for which they are held accountable. Similarly, community partners need to communicate the mission of their organization and their capacity to provide service-learning opportunities (Abravanel, 2003).

Building from such an understanding, enduring partner-ships are easier to accomplish. The best partnerships go beyond individual projects. Sustained partnerships result in better experiences for students, better community outcomes, and richer learning. Ideally, they are based on a "program" model with individual projects carried out within the program (Brown, 2001). Youth voice is another central component, since an effective service-learning partnership is not just a partnership between institutions; it is also a partnership between young people and adults, generating benefits both in schools and the community as youth take on adult roles and responsibilities (Roehlkepartain & Bailis, 2007).

As partnerships mature, they build social capital for organizations, schools, and students alike. As a result of collaboration, members build feelings of trust and mutual understanding and networks that boost their ability to accomplish further public work and to sustain better communities.

PARTNERSHIPS: Evidence from the Research

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What Are Reciprocal Partnerships With the Community?

Having reciprocal partnerships with the community means that service-learning participants have a collaborative and ongoing relationship with community organizations or members, which enables partners to benefit, along with service recipients. Partnerships typically take place between youth, educators, families, community members, community-based organizations, and/or businesses. Partnerships have a shared vision and common goals, and feature regular two-way communications, allowing members to be well informed and to leverage and utilize resources more effectively. The establishment of reciprocal partnerships in service-learning is a process that requires examination of each partner's expectations and a commitment to bridge the different cultures of the partner organizations. Typically partners co-develop and implement an action plan and share information about the assets and needs each brings to the partnership, resulting in viewing each other as valued resources.

Application to Service-Learning

- Wade (1997) documented substantial benefits of community partnerships for service-learning that included both teachers and students receiving the skills, information, resources, and technical assistance needed to meet a genuine community need; community agencies helping to meet client needs that could not otherwise be addressed by paid staff; more effective services to clients; the ability to match individual's capabilities and interests with the needed tasks; a widening of understanding about community issues; and the pooling of information and resources.

- In his analysis of lessons learned about partnerships over the course of a 3-year demonstration effort, Bailis (2000) observed that most partnerships are what he labeled "instrumental partnerships"; that is, ones that are created to implement a specific project and are subsequently dissolved when that project comes to an end. While instrumental partnerships can produce benefits for service recipients and providers, they are also associated with many disadvantages. These can include the considerable time and effort expended in continuously cultivating new partnerships, a relatively superficial relationship constructed between the school and the community organization, and a more limited impact of service activities. Bailis' study, which focused on multisector partnerships between colleges, K-12 schools, and community organizations, found that a very different kind of partnership was required to deepen relationships between partners and create higher quality experiences for students, agency staff, and service recipients. Bailis concluded that the practice of service-learning could ascend to a higher level of effectiveness and sophistication only in tandem with the cultivation of partner relationships that were long-term, well-designed, and mutually beneficial. Such partnerships were reciprocal in nature, characterized by collaborative communication and interaction between the stakeholders and an efficient leveraging of community assets.

- In a three-phase study of service-learning, Bailis and Melchior (2004) found that many educators felt they could determine community needs themselves, without the help of partners. They cautioned that while the need for equal and reciprocal partnerships was often expressed by practitioners and researchers, implementation of this concept frequently lagged far behind intention.

- After interviewing staff from six different community agencies invested in collaborations with schools and youth volunteers, Batenburg (1995) concluded that schools and agencies represented two radically different cultures and needed to take the time to identify and work through their differences. Writing from the community agency perspective, Batenburg said that schools were often difficult partners because of scheduling inflexibility, bureaucratic control, and teachers' inability to listen. Agencies were sometimes hampered by internal problems and an inability to work with multiple volunteers at the same time. Nonetheless, agencies remained committed to partnerships with schools because of the desire to serve clients and increase the diversity of volunteers.

- Abravanel (2003) identified a number of different areas where community organizations and schools had completely different expectations for service-learning. She pointed out that while agencies were focused on the end product of service, such as the planting of trees or building of houses, schools were focused on the process of learning and acquiring knowledge and skills. Agencies generally wanted their youth volunteers to follow a prescribed course of action to meet the goals of the agency, while many schools wanted to see youth have a greater role in planning and leading projects. The agency or organization defined success by the accomplishment of certain tasks, while the school determined success when students met particular academic benchmarks or standards. Requirements in other areas, such as transportation, scheduling, and assessment, could also differ markedly between school and community partners. She cited the essential importance of school and community partners engaging in an ongoing dialogue to develop and refine the partnership. What schools need to communicate to the community partner is a clear definition of service-learning, the essential elements of a service-learning program, the benefits to the community, the academic and curricular standards for which teachers are held accountable, and the role of youth voice in implementing projects. What the community partner needs to communicate to the school is the mission of the organization, the capacity of the organization to provide service-learning opportunities, and both the resources available and the costs required to support the service-learning partnership.

- In reviewing the literature on service-learning sustainability as well as lessons learned from her study of six schools and three districts in New Hampshire that received state grants to implement service-learning as an educational reform strategy, Billig (2002a) said that one of the key factors leading to service-learning sustainability was enduring partnerships that featured mutual high regard and reciprocity. These partnerships helped to lend stability to service-learning practices. When problems occurred, they were able to be solved because the sustaining sites featured open communication with leaders in the school and community who were already supportive.

- In Billig's (2002b) study of 18 service-learning programs funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation over a 10-year period, reciprocal partnerships were seen as one of seven critical success factors in institutionalizing service-learning practice. School service-learning leaders often found multiple ways for partners to work together to build long-term interest and commitment.

- A 3-year, in-depth evaluation of the CalServe initiative (Ammon, Furco, Chi, & Middaugh, 2002), which was created to promote sustainability and institutionalization of service-learning in California's K-12 schools, underscored the importance of reciprocal partnerships as one of the foundations of program sustainability. The study also found that school/community partnerships were frequently strengthened by "a focus on an 'issue' area in which most of the students' service-learning activities occurred" (pp. 7-27). The issue, whether it was related to environmental, social, political, or other areas, helped to provide a central organizing principle around which both partnerships and curriculum could be developed.

- In his study of 80 schools and districts across the United States that had successfully institutionalized service-learning, Kramer (2000) cited reciprocal partnerships as one of eight essential categories. He reported that "projects became successful and permanent by developing stable, long-term relationships with other stakeholders, particularly at the local level" (p. 35). When partnerships were short-term and isolated, he found a diminished interest from teachers and students in service-learning because of the lack of local support and the difficulty in initiating more partnerships.

- In a report describing lessons learned and outcomes of the W.K. Kellogg *Learning In Deed* project (Fredericks, 2002), local sites shared a number of specific strategies related to research-based indicators that were effective in building and maintaining reciprocal partnerships. The indicators and strategy examples included: (a) co-developed policies and practices that govern the operation of school/community partnerships; (b) ongoing opportunities to meet, discuss expectations, and when necessary, revise the operation of service-learning activities; (d) mechanisms to evaluate the impact of the partnership; and (d) shared training and other resources.

Educational Research Supporting This Concept

- In a study of 62 school/community partnerships to support language minority student success, Adger (2000) found that schools most often partnered with either ethnic organizations, community-based organizations whose function is the partnership, or multipurpose service organizations. Types of relationships and contributions varied, and the partnerships were fluid in nature, with new partners coming and going as funding streams evolved. About half of the partnerships featured joint leadership. Partnerships that were most successful in helping language minority students achieve academic success were those that had adequate resources, program flexibility, client responsiveness, and provisions for evaluation.

- Sheldon and Epstein (2002) examined the impact that school and community partnerships had on students and found that communication and active involvement of family and community members on activities that focused on student behavior resulted in fewer disciplinary actions.

- An evaluation of Citizen Schools (Mott Foundation, 2007) showed that students who worked with adult volunteers in hands-on activities during after-school programs developed academic and leadership skills.

- A study of the Peekskill, New York, extended day program showed that strong school-community partnerships resulted in students acquiring greater self-discipline and increased scores on measures of academic progress (Mott Foundation, 2007).

- A report issued by the Carnegie Foundation (1988) discussed the benefit of reciprocal partnerships for urban schools. Researchers found that partnerships are particularly useful in helping educators to respond to the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse students.

- Research from the Search Institute (Scales & Leffert, 2000) and from Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele (1998) identified community involvement among the lists of experiences that young people need to thrive. Such partnerships lead to many aspects of healthy human development.

- Grossman and Tierney (1998) found that positive relationships with caring adult mentors was associated with reduction in risky behaviors and increased academic performance and attendance.

- Youth with opportunities to work in communities show higher scores on a constellation of youth development variables, such as resilience, efficacy, and having positive role models (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

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