



**MEET THE
PROMISE OF
CONTENT
STANDARDS:
THE ROLE OF
THIRD-PARTY
PROVIDERS**



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Learning Forward's *Transforming Professional Learning to Prepare College- and Career-Ready Students: Implementing the Common Core* is a multidimensional initiative focused on developing a comprehensive system of professional learning that spans the distance from the statehouse to the classroom. The project will reform policy and practice and apply innovative technology solutions to support and enhance professional learning. With an immediate focus on implementing Common Core State Standards and new assessments, the initiative provides resources and tools to assist states, districts, and schools in providing effective professional learning for current and future education reforms.

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Monty Martinez is superintendent of a small, rural school district. During several sessions at a national conference, he converses with four colleagues who are superintendents in districts of varying sizes in his state, along with two superintendents from other states. Part of the conversation focuses on their intentions to support teachers in creating authentic classroom learning experiences for students as they implement Common Core Standards. The superintendents often hear that teachers need more appropriate instructional resources. Not only do teachers want resources that would help them adapt their teaching of concepts new to the curriculum, they also want the ability to share resources and growing expertise with other teachers. Supporting such collaborative practice requires district leaders to develop a multi-district, technology-enabled network that would allow teachers to archive and tag instructional resources, review and critique them, and adapt them for use within their own classrooms.

As the superintendents ponder the challenges and benefits of such a network, they commit to share the idea with their curriculum leaders and principals to gather feedback and questions. After two weeks, the superintendents meet again via Skype to share what they learned. Their second conversation confirms that principals want teachers and students to have access to rich, varied, and relevant instructional resources, yet teachers find it difficult to find high-quality resources that address the standards or support new instructional strategies. Principals and the curriculum leaders also want teachers to have a wide variety of options in addition to what is already available from publishers. The superintendents plan their next step—talking about their idea with several network vendors and software developers to get feedback and additional information. Those in the same state invite their regional education centers to join the conversation. They agree on the vendors each would call; each superintendent also agrees to identify a local software developer. They plan to hold a third call in a month. Before the call the superintendents use a common template to create summaries of what they learned.

During their third call the superintendents report that most of the vendors sell existing products that would accomplish what the superintendents want to do; however, those products are not designed for cross-state use. A network vendor had been intrigued with the notion of collaboration across states and districts, and described how her company might work in partnership to redesign and make the changes needed to achieve the superintendents' joint goals. One of the software developers also had expressed an interest in working with the districts to construct a technology solution to achieve the superintendents' goals.

The superintendents decide to develop a joint agreement, with approval of their boards of education, to form a partnership. They agree that after the partnership is in place, they will develop a Request for Information (RFI), which they will submit to a broader list of vendors and developers to identify the best partner to join with district leaders and teachers to (a) conduct a feasibility study, (b) develop a proof of concept, and (c) eventually develop or adapt a technology solution to put rich, relevant resources in the hands of classroom teachers to support instruction and real-life application of Common Core concepts.

At the end of a four-month period, the district superintendents complete their joint agreement, issue RFIs, receive and screen responses, and select three vendors from which to request cost quotations. After receiving the cost proposals, reviewing them with their boards of education, and selecting a vendor, they sign an initial contract with a new partner who is willing to think out-of-the-box with them to launch the feasibility study.



CONTEXT

Today, educators are at work to achieve deep implementation of more rigorous content standards, engage in more focused teaching and instructional leadership, and meet the needs of a diverse student population. Their need for appropriate resources has never been greater. Providing educators with both professional learning and instructional resources requires focused attention on access to those resources.

And because the array of resources and service providers is growing exponentially, teachers find it challenging to invest the time to locate high-quality resources that promote the learning experiences that new standards require. Selecting reliable providers who work as partners with their clients is not unlike the challenge Martinez and his colleagues describe in the opening vignette. They want to think creatively about meeting their needs. Education leaders are looking for providers who want to partner with them to achieve their goals rather than merely sell them goods and services.

This brief explores how district and state leaders can engage with third-party providers as partners. In particular, it describes how educators and developers can work together to find or create resources aimed at educating every student to meet rigorous content standards and supporting every educator to achieve high performance through continuous professional learning. The discussion includes examples of partnerships developed to provide access to technologies; the Appendix contains questions to consider before entering into a partnership as well as resources to help education administrators define and seek partners for development projects.

Third-Party Providers

Third-party providers help education agencies meet their goals of providing high-quality education to every student. As external providers they offer the services, products, and goods that education agencies are unable to provide, or that they need to function. Third-party providers include individual consultants, organizations, agencies, companies, professional associations, institutions of higher education, or regional education agencies that provide services, goods, or products to state departments of education, school systems, or schools. Regulations defining third-party providers and governing how they work differ within each state. For example, in some states third-party providers are any individuals not currently employed by a local board of education or

those who work for for-profit or not-for-profit organizations. On the other hand in some states, employees of local boards of education who provide services in another district are considered third-party providers. Some state regulations declare state-sanctioned regional education agencies to be third-party providers, while others do not. Those who engage with third-party providers should understand their state regulations and follow them faithfully. Such policies ensure that public funds are used appropriately to meet identified needs.

An additional category of third-party providers, often not considered, includes community organizations, museums, social service agencies, local businesses and civic groups, public libraries, and other agencies that have resources available to support education.

From Traditional to Collaborative Partnerships

Traditional partnerships exist between a vendor and a single agency; however, the power of collaborative purchasing agreements in areas such as energy, health care, insurance, and other areas demonstrate that forming consortia across multiple agencies can both reduce costs and increase the value of a partnership. As educators seek greater fiscal responsibility and attempt to accomplish more with fewer resources in schools, they can benefit from examining the potential of collaborative purchasing agreements to achieve common goals. For example, regional education agencies that serve multiple school systems, usually smaller ones, form collaborative agreements with participating districts to contract services that the districts could not manage or access because of their size. Minnesota colleges and universities have a collaborative sourcing agreement that describes the mission to “collaborate to drive innovative strategic sourcing solutions to achieve sustainability and best value by leveraging the system’s buying power.” (Finance Division, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2013).

In the area of professional learning, collaborative partnerships for transformed learning formats may, at first, be more difficult to imagine than those created to provide a more traditional learning experience. One-size-fits-all, episodic, sit-and-get training or lecturing have been the normal learning formats. In such cases, multiple education agencies or schools have formed collaborative agreements that bring staff together to hear a single speaker or participate in a workshop or course. Such partnerships have been relatively easy to consider. With a transformed approach to professional learning, however, particularly one in which educators engage in job-embedded, team-based professional learning, forming collaborative partnerships may seem to be more remote possibilities.

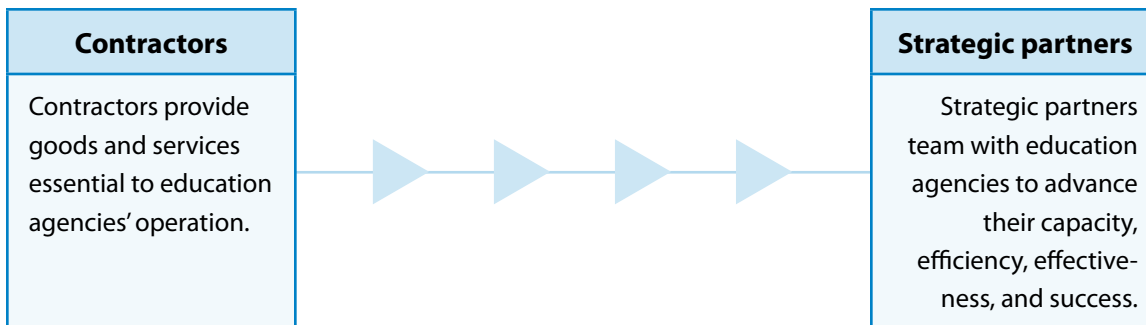
Yet, the nature of standards-based learning for students and educators demands that educators can access high-quality resources to stimulate and inform their learning and practice. These resources might include online access to academic journals; networking tools that support teamwork; video libraries; archiving, tagging, and retrieval services for collaboratively developed, juried lesson and unit plans; student assignments and assessments; instructional resources; video sharing capability for peer observation, coaching, and mentoring’ and options to personalize learning for individual goals, team and school goals, and initiative-specific goals.

<p>In Washington, school districts have formed two consortia to increase district access to high-quality education resources and to strengthen district buying power to invest in them.</p>	
<p>Washington Learning Source</p>	<p>DigitalEdge</p>
<p>The Washington Learning Source (WLS) is a collaboration of the state’s nine Education Service Districts, providing a central location for purchasing educational resources. Educators can take advantage of the most in-demand commercial products and services on the market at significantly reduced rates. For more information see www.walearningsource.org</p>	<p>DigitalEdge, offered by one of the state’s (Wash.) ESDs, provides contracts on educational technology and audio-visual solutions that are competitively bid and made available to Washington K-12 public and private schools. For more information see http://esd112.org/digitaledge</p>

Just as partnerships emerged among districts and vendors in Washington to meet districts’ specific needs related to technology-driven reforms, similar partnerships are now needed to address instructional and professional learning needs related to Common Core standards and related student assessments. When education leaders think beyond the parameters of traditional vendor relationships, they can find greater possibilities for the structure and scope of partnerships.

Types of Third-Party Provider Relationships

Third-party providers serve important purposes within education agencies. Their interactions with education agencies fall along a continuum. On the far left-hand side of the continuum are contractors who provide goods and services essential for basic operation. On the far right-hand side are strategic partners who work in a unique partnership with education agencies to enable them to meet their goals in unique ways.



Contractors to education agencies provide supplies, equipment, and other products or services such as physical goods, Internet access, or insurance. Criteria for selecting contractors include price, product reliability and quality, dependability, customer service, responsiveness, accuracy in delivery and billing. Strategic partners often include consultants and companies that work in collaboration with an education agency to ensure that it meets its goals. Strategic partners enhance business and human capital within an education agency. Criteria for selecting strategic partners include responsiveness, currency in the field, adaptability, usefulness of guidance and advice, systems for forecasting trends, questioning, ability to serve as thought partner, responsiveness to challenges, and exploration of multiple solutions. Sometimes a relationship that began as a contractor-oriented relationship evolves into a strategic partnership as the provider and the educator agency work together more closely to enhance each other's success.

Successful third-party relationships, whether oriented toward contractor or strategic partner, are those in which all partners receive mutual benefit. In this way, all members have a vested interest in the success of the relationship and commit to maintaining it. Imagine that a school system enters into an agreement with an Internet provider. Multiple aspects of the educational and business operations of the school system rely on access to the Internet, so the district's ability to operate depends of the Internet provider's ability to make bandwidth available to all potential users, especially during peak usage times during the school day. The Internet provider, to sustain and grow its business, depends of the district's satisfaction with its service and the resulting positive referrals the district offers on its behalf to other potential clients. Simply put, the success of one party is dependent on the success of the other.

When the balance of benefits is skewed in a third-party relationship, there may be potential challenges. For example, if a provider reduces the quality of his product to increase profit or sells the client a less expensive product that reduces its functionality, those within the education agency using the product may suffer. That relationship is in danger.

Effective Third-Party Provider Relationships for Professional Learning

When new initiatives are launched, education agency administrators often look to third-party providers for support and to grow internal expertise related to the new initiative. This is particularly true with Common Core standards. Districts look to those instrumental in developing and supporting implementation of the standards to provide expertise, guidance, and appropriate resources for building awareness about the standards and supporting implementation. This places a significant responsibility on third-party providers to engage in innovation and continuous development. Third-party providers need to lead the way for their clients and customers, by investing in research and development to be ready to meet emerging needs of their clients.

Establishing effective third-party providers relationships to meet the increasingly complex demands for professional learning requires considerable commitment from the provider and education agency. Third-party relationships for professional learning are based on the following set of assumptions:

- When education agencies specify their professional learning needs based on student, educator, and system data, needs are clearer and more focused.
- When education agencies use identified student and educator learning needs as their primary criteria for screening, reviewing, and selecting providers of professional learning, the fit between the identified needs and the services and products provided will be tighter resulting in a greater return on investments.
- Thoughtful planning, monitoring, and evaluation of implementation of purchased services and products increase the potential for impact.
- Sharing resources across classrooms, schools, school systems, regional areas, and states increases the potential for impact on educator and student learning.
- Consumers and providers share responsibility for ensuring high levels of return on investments.
- Systems for screening, reviewing, and evaluating investments in professional learning must be integrated into routine processes and supported with technology to alleviate undue burden and make them easily accessible to both entities (Kentucky Professional Learning Task Force, 2012, pp. 2-3).

Partnership Attributes

Successful partnerships between third-party providers and education agencies demonstrate the following traits:

- Clarity of goals
- Transparency
- Trust
- Flexibility
- Responsiveness
- Strategic planning
- Collaborative engagement
- Joint decision making, as appropriate
- Constant nurturing
- Deep understanding and appreciation for each other's capacities and needs
- Frequent communication and constructive, honest feedback.

To move traditional vendor-customer relationships to true partnerships, education agency administrators and third-party providers make their expectations of each other explicit. For example, education agency administrators want providers who are willing to demonstrate these commitments; third-party providers want customers and clients willing to do the same. Education agencies want providers who are willing to be advocates and collaborators rather than simply service and product providers. Educators want to be able to depend on the expertise and advice of their providers, yet want them to recognize that education agencies are unique, so that one-size-fits-all products and services are not always useful. Vendors want clients, customers, and, eventually, partners who recognize and appreciate their expertise, and who are willing to consider thoughtfully suggestions and recommendations. They also seek honest feedback about their services and products to improve them.

Decisions about Entering into a Partnership

Entering into a partnership with its formal instruments and contracts can be straightforward. The formation of a strategic partnership, especially if the parties are coming from a client-vendor relationship, however, is complex. Long before the formal work begins, all parties to a potential partnership need to consider their rationale and expectations

for partnership and their responsibilities should a partnership be formed. To guide them in this process, the series of questions in the sidebar, “Questions to Ask: Make sure you put the partner in ‘partnership’” address those and other critical issues.

Deciding to Decline Partnerships

Not every partnership is advantageous, even if it comes with a substantial monetary benefit. Partnerships that clearly benefit one partner without equally strong benefits for the other partner are likely to be problematic. Partnerships that distract a school or district from its core functions, add goals that are beyond the scope of the partner’s current focus, or stretch existing resources are not likely to add value. A partnership that does not meet an immediate, high-priority need or accelerate achievement of clearly defined goals may fragment efforts and resources within a school or district.

It is particularly important to ensure that the partners share common values and assumptions about education, have intersecting goals, and are committed to advancing one another’s goals. When a partnership seems too good to be true, it might be.

Perfecting Partnerships

Reciprocally beneficial partnerships expand opportunities and extend the capacity of schools and districts. Schools and districts have much to offer as partners because they are so visible in their communities and because they touch so many members of a community. They have much to gain from a productive, mutually beneficial partnership, and potentially much to lose from ill-chosen partnerships. The sure way to find and enter partnerships that add value to each partner is to take adequate time to build relationships with potential partners, assess potential partnerships, evaluate partnerships they enter, and decline partnerships that might detract from their priorities and immediate needs.

If, after considering the expectations and implications of a partnership—or at least giving as much forethought as possible—an education administrator and third-party service provider decide to form a strategic partnership, the next step usually requires an extended formal process during which education agencies develop Requests for Information (RFI), Requests for Proposals (RFPs), and Requests for Quotations (RFQ). Core elements of each of these three documents appear in the Appendix.

Make sure you put the partner in ‘partnership’

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

Potential partners should carefully consider these questions to guide themselves in developing a productive partnership.

1. How will this partnership add value to our existing goals and planned strategies?
2. What benefits, real or intangible, will each partner realize?
3. What are the costs — real, intangible, or possible — of the partnership?
4. What are the expectations and requirements for each partner with specifics about a timeline for delivering?
5. What procedures or protocols will be used if one partner wants to alter any aspect of the partnership plan or terminate the relationship?
6. Which decisions related to the partnership will both partners make together? Which ones may partners make independently?
7. What is the communication process? Who will speak for the partners?
8. How will disagreements be handled?
9. Who will be responsible for managing or supervising the partnership?
10. What criteria will be used to measure success? What benchmarks?



For further explanation, see Appendix pages 21 – 23.

Source: Adapted from “The perfect partnership,” by Joellen Killion, 2011, *JSD*, 32(1), pp. 11-15. Copyright 2011 by Learning Forward. Adapted with permission.

In the Partnership: Responsibilities for Professional Learning Providers and Consumers

In the course of a partnership, each partner has responsibilities to fulfill. The following code of responsibility for third-party providers and customers, recommended by the Kentucky Professional Learning Task Force, specifies the responsibility of each for the success of the partnership.

Code of Responsibilities for Professional Learning Providers

I/WE AGREE TO

- Provide high-quality professional learning services or products that
 - are based on Kentucky's Standards for Professional Learning;
 - are based on available and provided research or evidence;
 - align directly to the consumer's needs;
 - provide ongoing support for implementation; and
 - provide guidance for evaluating effectiveness and impact.
- Develop in collaboration with potential consumers memoranda of understanding, service contracts, work plans, or purchase agreements that make explicit goals, indicators of success, timeline, cost, roles, responsibilities, and other conditions related to the services of products.
- Represent accurately the potential for impact and results of the products and services.
- Disclose to consumers potential conflicts of interest upon discovery of such conflicts.
- Abide by the laws (statutes, rules, court decisions, etc.) of the states in which we are doing business.
- Provide all services and products within the time designated unless the contract for services has been mutually renegotiated.
- Make explicit use agreements for products or services beyond the scope of the contract.
- Provide references from similar clients and evaluations of previous services when asked.
- Hold consumer success as the first priority.
- Conduct all consumer interactions, services, and other communication with professionalism.
- Regard any communication, service, interaction, etc., as confidential unless an explicit written agreement is sought from the authorizing person within the consumer agency.
- Provide ongoing constructive feedback to consumer representatives about the progress of the service or product.
- Maintain a current list of services, evidence, and clients who have agreed to provide information to other potential clients about the provider's services and products.
(Kentucky Professional Learning Task Force, pp. 20-21)

Code of Responsibilities for Professional Learning Consumers

I/WE AGREE TO

- Provide high-quality professional learning to educators by committing to implement Kentucky's Standards for Professional Learning.
- Sustain resources to support full implementation of professional learning.
- Identify explicit professional learning needs based on student, educator, and system data and communicate identified needs to potential providers.
- Engage participants or representatives of participants in developing the expected goals, indicators of success, timeline, roles, responsibilities, expected scope of implementation, and other information to clarify expectations for their engagement in professional learning.
- Develop in collaboration with potential or selected third-party providers memoranda of understanding, service contracts, work plans, or purchase agreements that make explicit goals, indicators of success, timeline, cost, roles, responsibilities, expected scope of implementation, and other conditions related to purchased services or products.
- Disclose potential or real conflicts of interest to potential or selected provider prior to execution of final agreement.
- Conduct all provider interactions, services, and other communication with professionalism.
- Regard any communication, service, interaction, etc., as confidential unless an explicit written agreement is sought from the authorizing person within the provider organization.
- Provide ongoing constructive feedback to provider about the progress of the service or product.
- Provide timely and accurate information via the Third-Party Provider Information and Review System. (Kentucky Professional Learning Task Force, p. 21)

Evaluating Partnerships

Partners will determine the degree of formality of evaluation of the partnership. For example, partners might decide to conduct evaluations jointly or to contract with an external evaluator to conduct a more formal evaluation. Establishing a timeline for regular “check-in” conversations, progress monitoring, and ongoing assessment is necessary. The following questions might guide periodic status conversations:

- What tangible benefits are we each gaining? What evidence do we have of these benefits?
- What intangible benefits are we each gaining? Where have we seen examples of those benefits?
- What challenges are we experiencing in our partnership? How are those challenges affecting us? What strategies will we implement to alleviate these challenges and prevent them in the future?
- How satisfied are we with the level of communication between us? What changes, if any, would we like to make?
- How are we progressing on our goals? What evidence do we have of our progress? Where are we in terms of our benchmarks?
- What changes do we want to consider at this point?

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Ensuring that every educator has access to high-quality professional learning is a collaborative responsibility of third-party providers, education agencies, and educators. The success of professional learning for Common Core standards depends on educators' access to research-based, content-specific, diverse, adaptable services and products aligned with new standards. Working in partnership to support professional learning, all partners benefit.

Third-party providers

- Seek to understand educators' needs, conditions, and circumstances and provide innovative solutions to address them;
- Engage actively employed educators in the design and development of products and services intended to meet their professional learning needs;
- Meet the described needs of educators while guiding them to try innovative approaches to meeting their identified and emerging needs;
- Provide long-term, differentiated support for users to promote deep implementation;
- Invest in research, development, assessment, and evaluation of products and services for continuous improvement;
- Participate as strategic partners with clients and customers to identify trends, solve problems, address barriers, and ultimately increase educator effectiveness and student success; and
- Maintain knowledgeable field service representatives who provide just-in-time support to maximize use of products and services.

Education agency leaders

- Invest time to identify clearly and thoroughly needs, conditions, parameters, and provider criteria for services and products;
- Engage potential third-party providers in the needs and/or problem identification process;
- Invite potential third-party providers to serve as strategic partners in identifying trends, solving problems, addressing barriers, and ultimately increasing educator effectiveness and student success;

- Invest time and effort in understanding the education agency’s responsibilities and commit resources necessary to achieve full implementation;
- Make informed decisions about contracting with third-party providers;
- Participate in third-party provider design and development work in partnership with other education agencies;
- Maintain open, frequent, honest, and constructive communication with third-party providers;
- Assess and evaluate use and effectiveness of products and services and share results with users and third-party providers; and
- Provide references for third-party providers as appropriate;

Individual educators

- Contribute to the identification of individual needs, conditions, circumstances, and parameters for products and services;
- Participate in third-party provider design and development work in partnership with other educators;
- Commit to investing the necessary time and effort to achieve full implementation of the products and services;
- Maintain open, honest, constructive, and frequent communication with education agency leaders and providers about the services and programs; and
- Contribute to ongoing assessment and evaluation of products and services to support continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

As in the past with other innovations, third-party providers are instrumental in providing guidance, direction, and models for effective teaching and learning to support successful implementation of new initiatives. With the advent of Common Core standards and complementary assessments, third-party providers can realize an opportunity to work with educators and education leaders to improve access to the resources needed for successful teaching and learning. If educators are to support students in meeting new content standards, their own professional learning requires access to resources that are content-rich and aligned with standards; model the learning processes and experiences they are expected to use; are easily accessible and can be personalized for individual, team, schoolwide, and initiative-specific goals.

Providing resources for professional learning for educators that meet the expectations outlined above reaches well beyond the work and capabilities of most education agencies themselves. Educators, education agency leaders, and third-party providers must join together as strategic partners who both accept and commit to a shared responsibility for the success of every educator and student.

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APPENDIX

Questions to Ask: Make sure you put the partner in ‘partnership’

[Back to list of questions.](#)

Potential partners should carefully consider these questions to guide themselves in developing a productive partnership.

1. How will this partnership add value to our existing goals and planned strategies?

Both partners have established goals and plans for achieving them. Just because partnership opportunities emerge, partners do not need to change their goals, add goals, or sacrifice their own goals. Strong partnerships enhance each partner’s goals rather than add work or distract either partner from their mission or goals.

2. What benefits, real or intangible, will each partner realize?

Benefits typically include resources— financial, human, or physical — that accelerate goal achievement. Often, partnerships are built on a financial basis, as when grants are given. Yet not all partnerships have a financial benefit. Sometimes partnership provides other benefits that are valuable. For example, a school with a commitment from a university faculty member to provide guidance or support is getting the service of an expert who has access to other professionals. Sometimes being a partner means being included in a network that provides other possibilities such as access to experts, information, or resources.

3. What are the costs — real, intangible, or possible — of the partnership?

All partnerships have costs. In the best case, costs can be calculated and weighed carefully when considering the partnership. In most cases some costs are hidden and often unknown until work begins. A district invited to become a site for a university research study stood to gain substantial benefit from the project. After the project began, university faculty requested data from the district and teachers for project evaluation. The district data were easy to compile; the data requested from participating teachers were non-routine, so collection created a burden for them. Finally, new teaching strategies required teachers to use specialized classroom equipment unavailable in most district classrooms. To participate fully, the district reallocated resources to buy the needed classroom equipment and delayed textbook purchases. The partnership suffered a rocky start because of hidden costs. And not every cost is financial. Sometimes, staff will gain added responsibilities without being able to remove any. While it may be impossible to

identify every cost in advance, especially in partnerships with substantial scope, partners must be as explicit as possible about their expectations of one another.

4. What are the expectations and requirements for each partner with specifics about a timeline for delivering?

A thoughtful partnership plan includes clear expectations of each partner, specifics about deliverables, including intellectual property rights, and firm timelines. When these components are in place, partners have clarity of expectations and can more easily determine what their individual roles will be. When these elements are unclear, partners form their own expectations or understanding. For more substantive partnerships, partners may choose to prepare and sign a formal memorandum of understanding or agreement. Whether a formal agreement exists or not, both partners are best served by a written plan of action that details expectations, deliverables, and timelines.

5. What procedures or protocols will be used if one partner wants to alter any aspect of the partnership plan or terminate the relationship?

In the excitement of forging new partnership, partners rarely think about future changes to the agreement or plan. Yet, as time passes and the partnership takes shape, it is likely that some changes will be necessary. For example, unexpected circumstances may delay deliverables. A retirement may mean that a key spokesperson will be replaced. Additional opportunities may expand possibilities. Understanding what process will be used to consider or initiate changes is important to discuss when forming new partnerships.

6. Which decisions related to the partnership will both partners make together? Which ones may partners make independently?

Both partners do not necessarily make all decisions that affect a partnership jointly. While a consensus decision about each partner's primary representative may be a decision partners agree on, in other partnerships partners may reserve the right to appoint a spokesperson without seeking agreement from the other.

7. What is the communication process? Who will speak for the partners?

True partners speak with a unified voice. As partners forge agreements about their joint work, they will establish an agreement about who speaks for the partnership; what aspects of the work are confidential; how messages about the partnership are shaped in press releases, updates, and reports; and how often partners communicate with one another and their publics. For some partnerships communication can be problematic, especially if the partnership is publicly visible. When one partner, who is seen as spokesperson, receives recognition or benefit that is not also given to the other partner,

misunderstanding can arise. If the joint project generates products, partners must clarify details of branding. For example, in initiatives funded by a private foundation, the sponsor may expect that a district logo and the foundation logo will appear on all related products. Careful attention to communication issues in advance will alleviate surprises and frustrations later in the partnership.

8. How will disagreements be handled?

While they are never expected, inevitably disagreements will occur. Partners who are uncomfortable with conflict may be hesitant to raise concerns for fear that, by doing so, they will harm the partnership. Knowing in advance how to handle disagreements helps partners be more comfortable with conflict. They may be more willing to express concerns when a process is in place for handling them. Constructive disagreements can strengthen a partnership when both partners know how to manage conflict.

9. Who will be responsible for managing or supervising the partnership?

Partnerships, depending on the scope, may need a manager or supervisor. In some cases, the partners hire a manager if there is a defined body of work to manage. In other cases, the partners form a steering committee or executive committee with representatives from the various stakeholders served by the partnership. In other cases, a single representative from each partner organization coordinates efforts internally related to a partnership. For example, a school principal may work with the local education foundation executive director to coordinate a project funded by the foundation in the school.

10. What criteria will be used to measure success? What benchmarks?

Each partner entering a partnership has goals. The partnership will have collective goals as well. Partners will want to be clear on those goals and to create a plan for measuring success of the partnership with mutually determined indicators of success, possible evidence, and benchmarks to measure progress toward the goals. The formality of the evaluation varies; however, the importance of evaluating the partnership never does. Regardless of the partnership's purpose, partners will want to take time frequently to assess the health of the partnership.

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Terms

Each of the requesting documents described below are related and similar, yet each is typically used for a specific purpose.

Request for Application

Request for Application (RFA) is similar to a Request for Proposal (RFP). The RFA is typically a one-time solicitation for applications addressing services to meet a specific purpose or a defined research topic. Each RFA specifies the scope of the work to be accomplished, its requirements and procedures, the evaluation process, and the submission criteria including date, format, submission process, etc.

Request for Information

Request for Information (RFI) is typically used for collecting information about potential sources and their capabilities as third-party providers within a market area to meet specified contract needs. The RFI is used if an education agency plans to involve a supplier in a new project or if it wants to scan the market for other potential suppliers. The RFI creates a structured process to let administrators narrow the long list of potential suppliers to a smaller number of relevant vendors, or the “shortlist.” After getting a shortlist it is possible to take the next step, developing and issuing a Request for Proposal or a Request for Quotation.

Request for Proposal

A Request for Proposal (RFP) is an official document that communicates to prospective third-party providers what an individual customer’s or a collaborative’s needs are related to products or services. The RFP gives members of a partnership a way of comparing the level of creativity and development skills among many vendors. Those identified skills could be used as parameters when choosing the proposal(s) to examine further or to pursue. To help vendors and prospective partners to respond with good, relevant suggestions, contractors need to compile an extensive and correct RFP. Such an RFP incorporates detailed information about what third-party providers need to submit to be considered as a provider of the services or products as well as the expected qualifications or requirements the vendor must meet to be eligible. The RFP also includes information on how to submit a proposal, the deadline for submission, the evaluation process, and notification schedules.

Request for Quotation

A Request for Quotation (RFQ), among the four formats, is probably most suitable for products that are standardized or produced in repetitive quantities. A useful RFQ document provides potential vendors with a detailed list of deliverables, including specific standards or metrics that must be used or met in producing the product or service. One example of standards is Standards for Professional Learning. In responding to RFQs, potential vendors provide a detailed quote for services and products that are identified as deliverables as well as an explanation about on how the deliverables will be developed.

Process for Selecting a Third-Party Provider

Assemble a team to:

- Determine the need for vendor; define product or service sought.
- Identify criteria for selecting vendor(s).
- Develop a Request for Information (RFI) to include some or all of the following:
 - Table of contents
 - Introduction or Synopsis
 - Scope
 - Abbreviation and Terminology
 - Background Description of Product or Service Requested
 - About [your education agency, school, or foundation]
 - About the context in which the product or service will be used
 - Statement of need
 - Requirements
 - Qualifications
 - Conditions that will be terms for future RFPs or RFQs
 - Concept
 - Timeframe
 - Requested Responses
 - Submitting Responses
 - Contracting Office Address
 - Primary Point of Contact.
- Identify possible vendors to receive the RFI.
- Gather information submitted.
- Review responses using established criteria.
- Develop Request for Proposal, which is a detailed proposal about how the vendor or designer would develop, design, or choose a product to meet needs. It is sent to selected “shortlist” vendors.
- Receive submissions.
- Screen, evaluate proposals.
- Check referrals from past and current clients.
- Select vendor(s).

In some situations a more appropriate document is the RFQ. In such a case, the team would complete the following process:

- Develop Request for Quotation, which is a price for a product or service.
- Negotiate contract
- Develop and sign contract
- Meet and review partnership regularly
- Communicate and provide feedback
- Evaluate services and products, partners' responsibilities, and adjust as needed

Typical Components of a Request for Proposal (RFP)/Request for Application (RFA)

Cover /Title page

- Agency legal name and address
- Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN)
- Terms of service
- Due date
- Executive summary—provides third-party providers a brief overview of the education agency and its requirements

Background

- **History.** Describes the relevant factors, needs identified, or conditions leading to the RFP/RFA.
- **Current needs/problems.** Describes the primary needs or problems to be addressed through the services or products requested.
- **Education agency overview.** Describes the education agency and its unique characteristics, conditions, circumstances, etc., so that potential third-party providers understand the prospective client or customer. Includes links or access to documents to learn more about the education agency.
- **Previous engagement with third-party providers.** Describes briefly other related partnerships with third-party providers.
- **Financial background.** Identifies relevant financial information related to the education agency pertinent to the RFP/RFA such as the source of funding, fiscal years in which payments will be made, dependency on “soft” funds, etc.

Specifications for products and services

This is typically the longest and most detailed portion of an RFP. It contains both qualitative and quantitative indicators that will determine third-party provider selection.

Specifications include

- Service and product levels, requirements, and expectations;
- Product and service technical requirements, such as operating platform, accessibility to technical support, software functionality, hardware parameters, etc.;
- Milestones;
- Deliverables;
- Timeline for submission, review and feedback, request for additional information, selection, contract negotiation, contract;
- Education agency constraints or limitations such as staff access, travel expenses, upgrade/modification costs, licensing rights, etc.;
- Contract length and renewal options;
- Budget.

Submission requirements

- Timeline with dates and times (time zones included) for
 - Requesting additional information or for submitting questions
 - Participating bidder conferences, webinars, phone calls, etc.
 - Submitting letters on intent, if applicable
 - Submitting final proposal
 - Notification of receipt of proposal
 - Receiving requests for additional information
 - Receiving feedback on proposal
 - Final selection notification
 - Contract negotiation
 - Launch of work plan

Vendor requirements

- Preferences, e.g. women- and minority-owned businesses, veterans, local providers, etc.
- Eligibility requirements
- Insurance
- Identification of potential conflicts of interest
- Equal opportunity employer/ discrimination statement
- Contract requirements
- Reporting/communication requirements

Contract terms and conditions

- Warrantees
- Contract length
- Intellectual property
- Delivery failure penalty

Selection process and criteria

- Timeline
- Proposal reviewers
- Criteria with weights or points, if applicable
- Submission format. (e.g. electronic or hard copies, number of copies, file format of document, length, margins, font size, preferred fonts, page numbering, footers and headers, acceptable and unacceptable appendices, font color, cover page requirements)
- Proposal recipient—identifies the name, title, department, address and/or email of recipient
- Contact person, title, phone, fax, and/or email for clarifications and questions

Typical Components of a Request for Information (RFI)

Project

[Name/Number/Identification/Classification]

Introduction or Synopsis

This is a Request for Information related to **[identifying policy, program, initiative, etc.]**

The **[education agency/agencies does/does not]** currently intend to award a contract, but to gather information for planning purposes. The same information will be gathered from different companies and will be used to evaluate what suppliers we will follow up the sourcing process with a RFP or RFQ.

Abbreviations and Terms

These include specialized terms that are specialized, especially those that may not be assumed to be familiar to the review team.

Background Description of Product or Service Requested

Brief statement of the circumstances/background/ situation prompting the Request for Information.

About [your agency/department/foundation]

[Your company] established **[year]**, is a local education agency.

Our district office is located at **[address]**.

Our demographics **[describe]**.

Teacher/staff **[describe]**.

Our mission is **[describe]**.

More information can be found at **[web address]**.

About the context in which the product or service will be used

[Describe what kind of product or service you are requesting information on.]

Statement of need

[Describe the needs that the product or service you are requesting information on shall fulfill.]

Requirements

[Describe the requirements, such as technical conditions that the product or service should fulfill.]

Qualifications

[Description of what qualifies a supplier for delivering the product or service.]

Conditions that will be terms for future RFPs or RFQs

- Payment term: [XX days]
- Delivery term:
- Delivery address:
- Quality requirements:
- Other requirements:

Concept

The education agency/agencies is/are conducting a market survey to establish a list of capable vendors that can [identify the service or product desired]. The education agency/agencies will share the responses to this survey with [which entities internal and/or external] to identify the purpose. [Add any additional pertinent information related to the product or service.]

Timeframe

This is the timeframe for the RFI and an eventual coming project

- [mm/dd/yy] The RFI is sent out
- [mm/dd/yy] Last date for questions
- [mm/dd/yy] Last date for submission of answer
- [mm/dd/yy] Result from the evaluation delivered from [your company].
- [mm/dd/yy] RFP or RFQ sent to suppliers that has passed the RFI
- [mm/dd/yy] Final supplier(s) chosen for prototyping and tests
- [mm/dd/yy] Begin production

Requested responses

Respondents are requested to provide the following information:

- A capability statement defining their ability to provide the services or products described;
- A schedule for services;
- Examples of previous services and products similar to that requested,;
- A list of clients;
- Past services provided to the education agency/agencies;
- Any potential conflict of interest.

Submitting Responses

Submit all responses to **[contact name and details about preferred format and how to transmit submissions]** by **[date and time including time zone]**. The **[education agency/agencies]** **[will/will not]** acknowledge receipt of submission via **[how]** **[when]**.

Contacting Office Address

Primary Point of Contact:

Name

Title

Phone **[accepting phone calls pertaining to the RFI]**

Email **[accepting emails pertaining to the RFI]**

Fax **[accepting faxes pertaining to the RFI]**

(Aderell, 2013; Bucki, 2013)

Typical Components of a Request for Quotation (RFQ)

Requests for quotations

Requests for quotations include the following components, all designed to clarify for potential vendors the required information they need to submit to be considered eligible.

- Overall project objectives;
- Specific deliverables, including:
 - Specific service and product technical specifications;
 - Service and product quality standards and measurements;
 - Service and product quality conformance methods;
 - Specific risks that may impact either the purchaser or performing organization.
 - Proposed schedule, including deliverable milestones and key dates.
- Preliminary contract information (e.g. contract will be fixed price, etc.);
- Additional information pertinent to the RFQ (e.g. response format, file or technical drawing specifications, etc.);
- Vendor selection methods (including information regarding the overall process, information gathering sessions, site visits, selection schedule, etc.); and
- Financial or other pertinent performing organization information (e.g. details of similar undertaken projects, references, staff curriculum vitae). (Bucki, 2013)



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