



THE PERFECT PARTNERSHIP

What it takes to build and sustain relationships that benefit students

By Joellen Killion

Schools and districts are beneficiaries of multiple opportunities to extend and enhance their core work of educating students through partnerships in two ways. These opportunities emerge either from invitations that come from outside the school and district, such as those from corporations, universities, or regional education agencies, or they are sought, such as through grant applications to public and private foundations or in selecting consultants to support initiatives. When partnership opportunities occur, thoughtful analysis of the opportunity before entering into a partnership ensures that the endeavor will thrive.

Any partnership offers both opportunity and risk. Assessing the potential of each partnership before entering into a relationship becomes a fundamental responsibility for school and district leaders. So, too, will potential partners want to consider carefully the benefits and costs of the partnership.

Partnerships give schools and districts opportunities they would not otherwise have. In times of decreasing revenue for schools, some partnerships seem more attractive.

They come in so many different forms: advertising on school buses; individual and school grants from the local education foundation; research studies with regional universities; vendor sponsorships to pilot instructional resources; initiative grants from private foundations or corporations such as the World Wildlife Fund-Canada and Loblaw Companies Limited joint grants to promote environmentally conscious schools; or grants from provincial ministries of education or federal agencies in the U.S. such as NASA, National Science Foundation, or the Institute of Education Sciences at the Department of Education. Each form of partnership has one common element: Each partner has its own expectations and goals.

Partnership requires trust and commitment. As in any long-term relationship, those entering partnerships explore several fundamental questions:

- What are our goals, vision, and dreams?
- What do we seek in a partner?
- What are our expectations for this partnership?
- How will we each contribute reciprocally to the fulfillment of the other partner's goals, mission, and vision?

Genuine partnerships are mutually beneficial experiences. When partners enter a relationship, they do so for one another's mutual benefit to accelerate the achievement

of their individual and shared goals with a commitment to work collaboratively to strengthen their relationship.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Some schools and districts as well as nonprofit education agencies seem to attract partnerships, while others do not. Lasting partnerships are cultivated through purposeful relationship building. What attracts one potential partner to a school or district may differ from what attracts another. Overall, some keys to cultivating partnerships are clarity of goals and strategies, demonstrated success, and consideration of the partner's needs.

Taking time to get to know the interests, priorities, needs, and goals of potential partners pays dividends later on. Understanding what is important to potential partners, their major accomplishments, what they want to achieve through the partnership, and what their areas of focus are allows partners to understand how they can contribute to each other's success. Without a deep understanding of and commitment to achieve the partner's goals as well as one's own, partners may find the relationship unfulfilling.

Successful partnerships are mutually rewarding. When each partner clearly articulates the organization's goals and intended strategies for accomplishing those goals, confidence in the capacity and competence to achieve the goals builds in the other partner.

ASSESSING POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIP

When opportunities for partnerships emerge, partners begin by considering a number of factors before signing on the dotted line. The list of questions below offers some criteria for considering whether a potential partnership is mutually beneficial.

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.

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 has benefits that are not typically considered, yet are enormously valuable. For example, a school that has a commitment from a

university faculty member to provide guidance or support might not be getting a specific grant from the university. Rather, the school is getting the service of an expert who has access to other professionals who might either provide direct support to the school or offer advice with the expert to share with the school. Sometimes being a partner means being included in a network that provides other possibilities such as access to experts, information, or resources.

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

All partnerships have a cost. In the best case, costs can be calculated and weighed carefully when considering the partnership. In most cases, though, costs are hidden and often unknown until the work begins. For example, a district was invited to become a site for a university research study. The benefits to the district were substantial. Over the course of three years, more than 100 teachers would participate in intensive professional development and coaching, receiving accompanying classroom materials. The professional development would take place in the summer and the coaching during the school year. Teachers would receive a stipend for participation. After the project began, the university faculty provided a list of data they wanted from teachers and the district to support the project's evaluation. While the data requested from the district were fairly easy to compile, the district coordinator had not thought to take the project proposal through the district's research review board to seek approval. In addition, data requested from participating teachers were not routine information teachers were required to keep, so the additional information was a substantial burden to teachers. In addition, the new strategies teachers were learning required access to specialized classroom equipment that was not available in most district classrooms. To make full use of the opportunity, the district needed to reallocate textbook adoption resources to buy the needed classroom equipment and delay the purchase of textbooks. The partnership did not get off to a smooth start because of these hidden costs.

Not every cost is a financial one. In some cases, staff will have added responsibilities of managing a project. Often when responsibilities are added, none are removed. While the project is a tremendous opportunity, district or school staff is stretched thin, and other aspects of their work may be affected.

While it is not possible to identify every cost in advance, especially in partnerships with substantial scope, it is important for partners to be as explicit about their expectations of one another as possible.

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

A thoughtful partnership plan includes clear expectations of each partner, specifics about deliverables, and firm timelines. When these components are in place, partners have clarity of expecta-

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tions 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.

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.

Each partner entering a partnership has goals. The partnership itself has goals as well. Partners will want to be clear on those goals.

Which decisions related to the partnership will both partners make together? Which 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.

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 want to 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 public. For some partnerships, this area can be potentially problematic, especially if the partnership is publically visible and if one partner receives recognition or other benefit as the spokesperson that is not equally afforded to the other partner. If the joint project generates products, the partners will want to clarify how those products will be branded. For example, for private foundation grant-funded initiatives, the funder may hold an expectation that the district's logo and the private foundation logo appear on all products associated with the project. Careful attention to communication issues in advance alleviates surprises and frustrations later in the partnership.

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.

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.

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

Each partner entering a partnership has goals. The partnership itself has goals as well. Partners will want to be clear on those goals and to create a plan for measuring success of the partnership that includes 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.

EVALUATING PARTNERSHIPS

Establishing a timeline for check-in conversations, progress monitoring, and ongoing assessment is helpful when planning partnerships. Partners will also want to determine the degree of formality of the evaluation. For example, partners might decide to conduct evaluations jointly or to contract with an external evaluator to conduct a more formal evaluation. Quarterly check-in meetings, annual reviews, or monthly calls are ways partners review and evaluate the partnership. 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?

AVOIDING PARTNERSHIPS

Not every partnership is advantageous, even if it comes with a substantial monetary award. 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 too thin 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 and potentially much to lose from 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 avoid partnerships that might detract from their priorities and immediate needs.

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