

POLICY BRIEF

Partnering With Communities to Promote Student Success: A Review of the Research

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Introduction

In “Closing the Achievement Gap: Report of Superintendent Jack O’Connell’s California P-16 Council,” [1] fostering partnerships is recommended as a strategy to close the achievement gap. School-community partnerships are common in schools that are closing the achievement gap. Such partnerships engage families, other community members, community leaders, and a wide variety of local businesses, agencies, institutions, and non-profit organizations.

These successful schools employ a broad range of school-community partnership strategies. Such strategies focus on 1) strengthening academic programs and learning by fostering student and family

engagement, promoting high expectations, and extending meaningful student opportunities to develop strong academic skills; 2) enhancing social support and social/physical well-being at school and beyond by connecting students and their families to needed resources, fostering a climate of care and respect, and helping to strengthen community and neighborhood contexts; and 3) strengthening school leadership and shifting organizational structures within schools by tapping local knowledge, resources, and constituencies to foster academic and social support, as well as facilitate stronger partnerships. The integrative concept of “community schools” links these multiple strategies.

Research Evidence on the Effectiveness of School-Community Partnerships in Closing the Academic Achievement Gap

Partnerships Can Promote Positive Student, School and Community Effects

Research on school-linked services and family and community engagement in

schools suggests that high quality school-community partnerships are associated with positive effects on student connectedness, attendance, motivation, conduct, persistence, academic achievement, and pursuit of post-secondary education; students of all ethnic,

language and socio-economic backgrounds appear to experience such effects. Effects on school-level outcomes also emerge to varying degrees, including improvements in school climate, perceived safety, and parent participation, as well as reductions in family violence and unmet basic needs. Emergent research suggests that some partnerships can foster positive neighborhood and community outcomes as well. While a causal link between partnership strategies and increased student academic achievement remains unclear, all researchers agree that not partnering with families and communities is likely to increase the risk of student failure.

Effective Partnership Strategies Share Key Qualities

Our knowledge of what constitute the most effective partnership strategies for producing stronger, more equitable educational outcomes is somewhat limited by the range of strategies that has been well-researched; in addition, what is most effective might in part be determined by local interests, resources, and needs. However, promising, sustainable practices share the following qualities: 1) a focus on fostering the success of children and youth; 2) active and ongoing

support from the school district and principal, and connection to a framework of formal school- and district-level policies that promote partnerships that reflect the full diversity of the student population; 3) respect for the knowledge and value of partners, and acknowledgement and action upon the challenge of working across different ethnic, language, and cultural backgrounds; 4) collaborative effort to identify local needs and build on local resources; 5) strategies tailored to reflect changing needs and interests at preschool, primary, and secondary school levels; 6) prioritization of personal, culturally sensitive outreach; 7) strategies to strengthen school staff capacity to work well across ethnic, language, cultural, and class differences; 8) opportunities for partners to expand their knowledge, skills, and networks in ways that build capacity to partner with schools and advocate for children; 9) solutions to overcome logistical and informational barriers to partnerships; 10) stable sources of funding; 11) ongoing evaluation and use of evaluation data in planning; and 12) recognition that it takes time to build trust and see large-scale effects.

Potential Obstacles to Policy Development and Implementation

There are several potential obstacles to policy development in this area, all of which are exacerbated by a climate of scarce resources. First, the current emphasis on standardized assessment has in some cases worked against investment in partnership-based strategies that focus on relevance, rigor, engagement, personalization, and meeting basic needs. Based on their vision of the appropriate role of schools, amongst some communities and policy-makers there is significant resistance to school-community partnerships. Because it is difficult to produce data that shows a clear

causal relationship between many partnership strategies and increased standardized test scores, and we lack well-researched intermediate indicators, making the case for sustaining investment in partnerships can be difficult. Finally, the challenges of working across public agencies at the state, county and local levels work against the kind of coordination that is likely to increase resources and streamline processes for school districts, schools, and their community partners.

Nonetheless, California has many components of an infrastructure to promote and support school-community partnerships. A variety of financial supports and technical assistance has been offered to California schools and districts, although the strategy has been comprised of a piecemeal combination of requirements, allocations, and competitive grants. For example, multiple policy mechanisms require schools and districts to involve parents or community members in governance (e.g., through School Site Councils, English Learner Advisory Committees), engage parents (e.g., NCLB Section 118, NCLB tutoring provisions, Title 1, Migrant Education), and develop plans for parent engagement (NCLB Section 118, School Site Plans). Healthy Start, Migrant Education, SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), and Homeless Youth and Foster Youth programs support a variety of school-linked and referral services. Nell Soto Parent/Teacher Involvement Grants support teacher home

visits. Afterschool Education and Safety, 21st Century Community Learning Center, and Service Learning grants offer opportunities to partner with local youth-serving organizations. School improvement resources may be used to foster partnerships that promote student engagement in rigorous academic learning (but whether and how such strategies are pursued is unknown). The fragmented implementation in California of policies that foster the conditions for partnership makes assessment of their overall effect challenging. However, initial assessments of the Healthy Start Initiative, the most comprehensive state partnership strategy targeting low-income communities, have been promising in terms of effects on students and families and leveraging of additional resources. Coordinating and building upon these components is an important next step in efforts to foster stronger, more equitable educational outcomes for children and youth.

Policy Recommendations: Building the Conditions for Successful Partnerships

Research suggests the promise of multiple partnership strategies, including school-linked services, further engaging families in teaching, learning and advocacy, and creating pathways through high school that draw upon local individuals and organizations to create programs that are engaging, personalized, and rigorous. A variety of state and local policies could be developed to support specific strategies. Here we highlight a variety of policy recommendations focused on creating the underlying conditions for successful partnerships, regardless of the specific strategy.

Expect Partnerships

Education policy makers must view community partnerships as a core element of what constitutes school, not merely an add-on or peripheral set of activities. This vision should reflect the ways that such partnerships can support students' learning and development, enhance the school environment, and strengthen students' families and communities. Such a shared vision should be reflected in state agency and policy-making practices and accountability mechanisms.

Provide Professional Development

In order to derive the benefits of partnerships, schools must be staffed and led by people who have the insight, knowledge and skills needed to effectively collaborate with local individuals and institutions. These include: 1) cultural capacity and cultural humility; 2) collaboration and cross-cultural communication skills; 3) knowledge of effective practices and strategies in community partnerships (including those focused on academic learning, social support, school leadership, and broader community development); 4) ability to use and share data, and 5) understanding of relevant policy arenas, funders and institutional actors in related fields such as public health and community development (particularly among school leaders).

State education leaders can take several specific steps to foster this expertise:

- Ensure that teacher and administrator credentialing requirements and pre-service training adequately prepare our educators to engage in the range of community partnerships associated with reducing the achievement gap.
- Build upon public-private partnerships to offer a coordinated range of technical assistance, professional development, and coaching services for school leaders and staff and their community partners, particularly in areas that do not have access to such opportunities. To the extent possible, offer sustained support over time that is tailored to local needs, and explore doing so through existing regional and county approaches to organizing professional development.
- Expand efforts to offer training to school district leaders and school board members on the importance of community partnerships and strategies for supporting them.

Foster Partners for Schools

- Explore public/private partnerships to ensure that families, community organizations, local agencies, and community leaders develop the knowledge and capacity to engage in partnerships with schools.
- Encourage partnerships focused on supporting family engagement that work through community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and ethnic/social organizations and networks which already have trusting relationships with local families.

Encourage Local Planning for Partnerships

Ongoing planning of comprehensive partnerships enables schools, districts and their partners to identify needs and resources, assess progress, and define strategies.

- Encourage and support schools and districts to build upon existing planning mechanisms and requirements, such as School Site Plans, NCLB Section 118 requirements regarding parent engagement, and Migrant Education plans to pursue ongoing planning for partnerships.

Provide Space for Partnership Activities

Schools need to create space for partnership activities; school-linked services research is particularly clear that providing services at school sites is critical to the seamless provision of needed services. Beyond asking schools to be creative with existing facilities, the state should consider the following steps.

- Review school designs and construction regulations to ensure that new facilities can be built with partnerships in mind

- Encourage the location of new school facilities in proximity to potential partner organizations and institutions.
- Address the regulatory challenges of using school buildings in off-school hours, and transporting children and school staff to other community locations.

Identify Sufficient, Sustained Funding

Partnership strategies often rely on short-term, inadequate funding; when resources disappear, programs do as well. California should take the following steps to strengthen and sustain resources for school-community partnerships.

- Identify state and federal resource streams that are administered through the California Department of Education which support partnership strategies in order to facilitate local coordination (for example, Title 1 funds, SIP funds, ASES/ASSET, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Healthy Start, Migrant Education, Homeless Youth programs, the Home Visit Program, etc.).
- Experiment with offering increased funding flexibility, coupled with adequate support and accountability mechanisms.
- Expand state-level efforts and support county and local efforts to braid resource streams across public sector areas (e.g. Education, Health, Community Development, Juvenile justice, Parks and Recreation) that can support partnership strategies. For example, innovative funding such as the Mental Health Services Act provides opportunities at state and county levels to work more closely with non-school entities to provide much needed (and effective) services.

- Consider targeted investment that supports an individual position at school sites to develop and coordinate school-community partnerships, or provide partial funding and expect that schools and communities share the cost.
- Create a system of tracking resource allocation and spending at the school level to ensure that partnership resources reach high-need schools and communities.

Evaluate Partnerships

- Rigorously evaluate the effects of partnership strategies on students, schools, partners and communities based on criteria that partnerships are designed to effect, and can reasonably be expected to effect.
- Require grantees to provide data that allows for sub-group analyses based on age/grade, socioeconomic status (SES), racial/ethnic background, home language, and English language (EL) abilities.
- Share evaluation findings with school and district partnerships in ways that inform their ongoing work.

References

1. California P-16 Council. (2008). *Closing the achievement gap*. Report of Superintendent Jack O'Connell's California P-16 Council. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. Retrieved March 17, 2008, from: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/pc/>