

Partnerships: Common Elements of Success

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Under the Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plan, partnerships between school districts and community organizations have become vital to progress. While partnerships have always been important to community building, it is now a necessary element when discussing LCFF and LCAPs. And with all that is expected of schools — healthcare, mental health, socio-emotional support, health and wellness, out-of-school-time learning, and college pathways — it will be, if it hasn't been already, the new normal.

Because of this, in the next few issues, California Schools will explore the qualities of successful and sustainable partnerships and the steps involved in making them happen.

“Partnerships are essential in order to align goals in a community and to inspire action about how to achieve those goals,” says Jill Wynns, former chairperson of the Cities Counties Schools Partnership, past president of California School Boards Association and current CSBA Region 5 director from San Francisco County and Unified School District.

Cities Counties Schools began in 1997 when founding partners CSBA, California State Association of Counties, and the League of California Cities came together to identify common challenges and explore the possibilities of tackling these issues together, versus on their own. “Organizations can accomplish a lot more together than any one organization can do by itself,” adds Wynns.

The Cities Counties Schools Partnership was a nonprofit until this year when it became a project of the Institute for Local Government. The three founding organizations are still heavily involved with connecting local government association leaders and providing resources “to improve the conditions of children, families and communities at the local level,” by promoting and nurturing coordination and collaboration with cities, counties and schools in California.

As with any good structure, such partnerships — schools and organizations working together to harness their collective talents and influence — start with a solid foundation. And while there are many layers of a partnership, one key ingredient to a strong foundation is a shared vision.

“One early key to success is to ensure everyone has a shared vision, a shared sense of purpose,” says Martin Gonzalez director of the Institute for Local Government. “Another key to success is taking the time

to clarify your group's expectations, roles and responsibilities," he says.

To assist in clarifying shared goals while community and partnership building, Cities Counties Schools developed a free resource guide for how to collaborate with other agencies, entitled, "Stretching Community Dollars: Building for the Future." First created in 2006 and updated yearly, the purpose of the guidebook is "to inspire, encourage and support local governments throughout California to achieve purposeful and sustainable intergovernmental collaboration."

According to the 2015 guide, the advantages of collaboration can be summed up in two points:

- More efficient with resources: Put simply, you can do more with less. By pooling financial and human resources, time and capital, the savings gained can go to other priorities. The cost of operations and services decreases while the quantity and quality of services increases. It decreases duplication and provides opportunities to enhance and expand programming.
- More effective in the community: The whole is greater than the sum of individual parts. By working together across jurisdictions, local government agencies will increase their reach, power and positive impact in the communities they serve. Collaboration allows agencies to increase their impact.

Elements of Success

Partnerships usually begin informally. "In the beginning of a partnership, if there is a meeting of the minds of what the issue is and how to solve it, and it's a relatively short amount of time to accomplish the goal, it's ok to be informal. In those instances, partnerships usually exist informally without paperwork or budgeting of resources," says Jo Lucey, immediate past president of CSBA, board member of Cupertino Union School District, and member of the Cities Counties Schools Partnership leadership council.

"However, when the objectives are larger in scale and scope and when the efforts take or are projected to take place over a protracted period of time then a more formal arrangement is warranted," says the Institute for Local Government's Gonzalez.

Other key components for school and community partnerships that school boards should be aware of:

- Commitment to one's organization
- Thoughtfulness of how goals align with others
- Recognizing and identifying shared goals and priorities
- Moving forward together toward to strategic shared targets
- Spirit of candor and honesty
- Egos are put aside for shared priorities
- Dignity given to all stakeholders

Redwood City 2020

Redwood City 2020 began in the early 1990s with a series of community discussions about the shape and look of the city in the new millennium. Originally called Redwood City 2000, the partnerships began with a series of community sessions where people came together to envision their community in the 21st century and beyond. Now, Redwood City 2000 is a community collaborative with a new name — Redwood City 2020, to reflect the organization’s long-term commitment to shared goals and collective impact. Goals include healthy, safe and academically strong students. Redwood City 2020 aims to reduce the impact of poverty, improve the academic success of students, increase community engagement, advance health and wellness and enhance safety.

The core group of partners include Redwood City School District and Sequoia Union High School District. Along with several other core partners, such as Sequoia Healthcare District, San Mateo County First 5, City of Redwood City, Kaiser Permanente, San Mateo County and the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University, their three priority areas are community schools, health and wellness and community engagement.

“Awareness of issues that impact the community and strong leadership and networking between leaders has been critical to the organization’s long-term success,” says Jana Kiser, executive director of Redwood City 2020. “Partnerships that are healthy have shared power, shared decision making and shared leadership,” Kiser says.

Having the capacity — the ability to understand, experience and do the work — is another healthy trait of successful partnerships, adds Deanna Niebuhr, senior director of community schools initiative with Partnership for Children and Youth. PCY works with school districts and their partners, like Redwood 2020, to support community schools, after school and summer partnerships, “through training, assessment, planning policy and advocacy.” It is one of Redwood City 2020’s allies and thought partners.

“When getting started it sometimes makes the most sense for a school district to find its most critical partner — a partner that can help make a significant impact for students and families. For example, many school districts start by working with their local family resource center either by starting a new relationship or deepening an existing one. Starting this way, makes it possible to establish a deep partnership in which establishing shared goals and re-deploying existing resources, however challenging, is more easily done. Establishing a few deep partnerships is more important than having many partners.” Niebuhr says. “Less is more.”

Moreno Valley USD Collaboration

In another example, Moreno Valley Unified School District, east of Los Angeles, is part of a partnership with an institution of higher education. The district’s school board recently approved an agreement with California State University, San Bernardino which would guarantee qualified students a place at the CSU. This ensures that students who have met the necessary requirements have a guaranteed university to attend after they graduate high school. This has given students the encouragement to fulfill college requirements and know that a local university is waiting and ready for them once they graduate. This is

exactly where Moreno Valley USD wants their students to go, fully prepared and without the need of taking any remedial classes.

“This incentive is critical, especially when many of our graduates are the first in their family to even consider college as a viable option. Our guaranteed-admission agreement with CSUSB gives those students a clearly marked path to college, makes it much more likely that they’ll actually get there, and increases the probability that they will complete and graduate from college and beyond,” says Moreno Valley USD board member and CSBA president Jesús Holguín. “Making connections and building relationships with higher education institutions is important to widen the pipeline for students to successfully access college. This is exactly where we want our students. The best strategy to accomplish this goal is by establishing effective collaborative partnerships between the K-12 system and higher education institutions.”

Opportunities and Challenges

Establishing collaborative programs is daunting. But there is no better time than now for school districts. According to the Cities Counties Schools guidebook, “Stretching Resource Dollars,” opportunities for partnerships are abundant in the time of LCFF. The reasons for which the guide outlines:

Engagement. The LCFF requires districts to adopt a Local Control and Accountability Plan with solicitation and engagement from teachers, parents and the entire community. Each LCAP articulates the district’s goals for improving student outcomes and how spending will be aligned to meet the goals. Cities, counties and special districts have an opportunity to connect and work with their local school districts through the annual development of the LCAP to discuss collaborative solutions to meeting the needs of their children and families.

Specific high-need populations. One of the key priorities of the LCFF is specific funding and attention committed to the needs of foster youth, low-income students and English language learners. These student populations would benefit the most from intentional integration and alignment of city, county and schools and special district services. Local government officials and staff have an opportunity to coordinate efforts through the LCAP annual process and to share the challenges and rewards of meeting the needs of specific high-need populations, and sharing information/data gathered with other local agencies.

Assessment. Tracking, analyzing and sharing data across sectors and jurisdictions is critical to informing the development of comprehensive and collaborative solutions. Through the LCAP annual cycle, community members have the opportunity to conduct and incorporate community needs and health impact assessments into the planning and recommendations given to the school district.

Of course, there will be challenges. “Stretching Resource Dollars” describes them as follows:

Attention. School board members and district staff are focused on understanding the details and regulations of the new law, ensuring they are meeting the requirements and timelines, and exploring successful implementation strategies. This necessary attention and focus can make it challenging to explore collaborative efforts outside of their immediate scope.

Time. The transition to Local Control Funding Formula began in the 2013-14 school year, but full implementation is projected to take eight years. With a change this significant, school districts will need time to explore what will work best for their students, schools and community – there will inevitably be a lengthy period of trial and error.

Despite the many variables to consider when developing partnerships, there is one constant — resources and support. There are many resources that can assist school districts to develop their first partnerships or sustain current ones. There are also numerous guides and collaborations that use their experiences and expertise to illustrate the many ways to move forward toward successfully achieving student achievement goals. In the next issue of California Schools, the Partnership series will look at partnerships focusing on the achievement gap and the resources and guides available to school districts.

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More Resources

Stretching Community Dollars Guidebook

www.ca-ilg.org/resource/stretching-community-dollars-guidebook

City Counties Schools Partnership:

www.ca-ilg.org/ccs-partnership