



# High-Stakes Partnerships

The desire to collaborate is high, but creating the right relationship is tough—and getting tougher

**Mara B. Huber and James A. Williams**

In this climate of dwindling resources and increasing expectations, educational partnerships are suddenly on the radar. Gone are the days of casual dalliances with college and business partners resulting in endless luncheons, photo opportunities, and flexible pots of money. In their place loom long-term commitments, shared accountability, and very real resources tied to partnership outcomes.

If you find your palms sweating at the thought, you are among the large number of reluctant partners in need of support.

We have all grown comfortable with the thick layer of gray that surrounds educational partnerships. Regardless of outcomes, we know there are few tangible repercussions when initiatives fall short. Viewed as peripheral to our primary job responsibilities, partnerships often are left to fizzle before their potential is realized.

The truth is that many partnerships are doomed to be underwhelming based on the sheer scale of intercultural and interpersonal differences. The worlds of public school, higher education, nonprofits, and business are all so profoundly disparate that one can almost hear an audible sigh of relief when grants run their course or programs are terminated.

And yet the promise of collaboration remains sweeter than ever. Programs and resources needed to fulfill our respective missions can be found just next door. Universities seek students and research subjects; agencies need youth to support; and schools seek professionals and services for their students, making us all key players in one another's productions.

Somehow the very notion of partnering has an inherent appeal. The idea of joining resources to produce something richer, deeper, and more wonderful than one could offer alone is ingrained in our collective psyche with "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" rolling off the tongue. And those tan-

talizing funding opportunities, millions of dollars for new and innovative partnership programs, are seemingly well within our reach, if only we can set the stage with a compelling case for need and a winning cast of characters.

But creating good partnerships is harder than it looks, and getting harder by the minute.

## Formalizing expectations

While funders increasingly are incentivizing partnerships, they also are raising their expectations. Requests for proposals now indicate that only innovative collaborations will be considered. Expectations are being formalized for additional components such as strong research and evaluation programs.

The all-important letter of support is no longer the gold standard for partner commitment. Suddenly funders are seeking evidence of deeper relationships with regard to decision-making, planning, and sustainability. And terms like "equitable partners" and "shared decision-making" are beginning to pop up in grant reviews, all suggesting a fundamental shift in expectations for collaborations and collaborators.

Not to be outdone, policymakers have begun to formalize their expectations for inter-institutional collaboration through legislation and grant programs. The preschool through 16 movement, which calls for a seamless pipeline between public and secondary education, serves as a poignant example of how far these expectations can be taken.

Since its beginnings in the early 1980s, the movement has resulted in efforts throughout the country to formalize partnerships, create pre-k through 16 councils and advisory boards, and develop initiatives that strengthen connections between education systems. Many states have officially integrated their offices of education in the belief that housing pre-k through 12 and higher education together under a single structure will result in enhanced articulation and align-

ment of programs.

Some states even have called for the development of partnership zones or councils that include mandated membership from key groups or organizations and enjoy budgetary oversight of money targeted to specific educational entities. Many find this notion of forced partnering somewhat uncomfortable, but indicators suggest that expectations for collaboration will continue to increase.

So what's a panicked education leader to do? Get strategic.

### The keys to partnerships

The concept of strategy is hardly a new one. As a nation we embrace it whenever a situation is deemed important yet complex. Issues related to homeland security or global relations automatically call for strategic planners and analysts. And even everyday citizens turn to strategists for help with investments, retirement planning, and other financial needs.

But what about educational partnerships? Are they important and complex enough to warrant a strategic approach? Even if we could begin to agree on their importance within the broader educational context, their complexity would still be called into question.

Underlying this issue is a fundamental assumption that partnering simply involves getting the right people around the table. And yet despite the lavish buffet of existing and past educational partnerships, the fact remains that dropout rates are too high and achievement too low, suggesting that whatever we've been doing simply isn't working.

But what exactly have we been doing? That is, what is the existing partnership model that needs to be changed? The truth is the word "partnership" gets thrown around loosely and can mean anything from co-sponsoring an event to shared planning and implementation. Indeed, partnership is a slippery term that is difficult to define and even harder to evaluate. And perhaps worst of all, it is a noun, suggesting that partnerships are things to be acquired, items that we own and can cross off our list as soon as we formalize the relationship.

If we want to get strategic about partnering, it's the verb, or technically the gerund, that we need to go after. Instead of thinking of partnerships as objects to be collected and displayed, we need to view them as means to very real and important ends.

This difference is not merely one of semantics, but instead represents a shift in thinking through which we can begin to focus not on partnerships as an entity, but also on the intended goals and outcomes that they afford. By giving these goals clarity and definition, we can then identify the best partners to engage with based on their resources, approaches, and alignment with our own plans and circumstances. It is this state of self-awareness and empowerment that makes us strong partners and sets the stage for impactful and sustainable collaboration.

It is somehow ironic that the secret to good partnerships is

in knowing who we are and what we're after. We may need to step away from our work and ask some soul-searching questions: "Who are we?" "What do we stand for?" And, perhaps most critically, "What are the non-negotiables when it comes to serving our students?"

Once we can answer these questions with clarity, consistency, and confidence, we can begin to realize the true potential of educational partnerships. ■

---

Mara B. Huber (mbhuber@buffalo.edu) is special assistant to the president for educational initiatives at the University of Buffalo and director of the Buffalo Public Schools/University of Buffalo Partnership. James A. Williams (jwilliams@buffaloschools.org) is superintendent of New York's Buffalo Public Schools.

## Strategic Partnerships

Although partnerships should be customized to fit respective needs and visions, the following strategies will help to ensure a strong foundation:

- **Powerful goals:** Goals should be clear, meaningful, and free of jargon. They should be specific enough to frame and evaluate the work but general enough to allow flexibility. Powerful goals allow you to prioritize your efforts, feel and communicate your impact, and achieve both short- and long-term success.

- **Aligned objectives:** Objectives allow you to unpack goals into specific components that can be demonstrated through activities and programs. Closely aligned objectives will ensure your success in achieving your goals and allow you to evaluate and communicate progress.

- **Realistic activities:** Partnership activities should align directly with objectives. They should be realistic in terms of resources and scope and should build in complexity as partnerships evolve. Activities should be evaluated based on their effectiveness in meeting target objectives.

- **Trust and respect:** Strong partnerships are built on a foundation of trust and respect. They should begin with a thorough understanding of one another's needs, interests, and visions. The temptation to diagnose or fix one another's problems should be avoided at all costs.

- **Invested partners:** The best partnerships include individuals and organizations that stand to benefit from partnerships in a meaningful and important way. By clarifying desired benefits and outcomes up front, buy-in and follow through can be maximized along with long-term sustainability. (And yes, we realize the "I" is missing, but the acronym doesn't work otherwise.)

- **Endorsed by leadership:** Ideally, partnerships should be endorsed by the highest possible level of leadership, on both sides. This will facilitate accountability and buy-in from key personnel and will help to build capacity once partnership initiatives are under way.

- **Real accountability:** At the end of the day, a specific individual needs to be accountable for the success of the partnership in its entirety; in essence to serve as the keeper of the vision. Although it is ideal to have accountability on both sides, a single point of accountability may be sufficient if that person is empowered and skilled enough to manage the partnership.

Copyright of American School Board Journal is the property of National School Board Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.