BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: TIPS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

Increasing community involvement in out-of-school time programs can yield significant benefits to programs and the students that they serve.[1] Community partnerships have the potential to meet a wide variety of needs, from improving participant recruitment and attendance to contributing volunteers or other resources to programs.[2] This research brief discusses ways in which community involvement can be important for out-of-school time programs and describes how programs can begin to identify valuable community resources and develop strategies for leveraging community support.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT?

A **community** is a group of people and/or organizations that are connected to each other through common interests, such as providing neighborhood services, or common characteristics, such as geographical location.[3]

> **Community involvement in an out-of-school time program** refers to the participation of community members in any aspect of an effort that is designed to serve young people "before school, after school, on weekends, and during the summer and other school breaks," as described by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time.[4] Community members may include individuals, families, schools, businesses, religious organizations, museums, libraries, and colleges and universities, among others, and they may demonstrate their involvement in various ways. For example, they may contribute *physical resources*, such as rent-free space or supplies; *social resources*, such as forming relationships with high-risk teens; *intellectual resources*, such as grant-writing expertise or mentoring experience; and *financial resources*, such as donations or other funding opportunities.[5]

WHAT BENEFITS CAN PROGRAMS DERIVE FROM COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT?

Community involvement in out-of-school time programs is associated with many positive outcomes and with higher-quality programming overall.[6] Research has shown that community involvement can:

- **Improve program recruitment and attendance.** Many out-of-school time programs are underutilized, especially by the high-risk, older youth most in need of them.[7] Programs can improve recruitment and attendance by asking community members such as teachers, guidance counselors, parole officers, and other youth service providers to refer youth and encourage them to attend.[8,9] Programs that are held at participants' schools can improve attendance by cutting out the need for travel.[10] Programs that partner with participants' families enjoy higher attendance, as well as improved activities and increased participant and family satisfaction.[11]

- **Help programs with mentoring and staffing.** Many out-of-school time programs turn to volunteers because they face financial limitations that make it hard for them to offer competitive wages. Programs can improve their participant-to-staff ratio and provide mentors for more young people without significantly increasing costs by reaching out to college students, retirees, parents, employees of local businesses, and other community members,[12,13]
- **Enhance physical and financial resources, broaden participants' experiences, and teach social responsibility.** Out-of-school time programs that partner with their communities may be able to access rent-free facilities, such as classrooms, gyms, and computer labs, as well as attract additional funding.[14] These partnerships may also enable programs to develop interesting field trips, career-related experiences, and service-learning opportunities. Studies have found that service-learning is a critical component for programs that serve 15-18 year olds and that providing youth with opportunities to participate in their community is a powerful engagement strategy that can also teach social responsibility.[15, 16]

HOW CAN YOUR PROGRAM IDENTIFY VALUABLE COMMUNITY RESOURCES?

Follow these steps to make building a network of community involvement and support systematic and manageable.

Step 1: Conduct a community asset assessment and generate a list of potential supporters.

- *First, consider existing partnerships that can be developed futher.*[17] The school that is providing classroom space for your program may agree to open up its computer lab. The business that has donated money may be interested in an employee volunteer program.
- *Next, walk around the neighborhood, look through the phone book, and use the Internet.* Take note of potentially interested businesses, libraries, museums, schools, social service agencies, and other organizations that serve young people. Check your city Web site and the Web sites of companies located in your area. Many public and private organizations have Web sites that list the contact information of someone who can point you in the direction of resource opportunities, answer questions, and field proposals.
- *Finally, involve program participants in the search, for example, through Community YouthMapping.* Community YouthMapping, which was created by the Academy for Educational Development in 1995, is a process that trains youth to survey their communities and document safe places to find recreation, health care, employment, and other services and resources.[18] Young people collect this information and it is then "mapped," either online or on paper, and made available to the community. For more information, see http://www.communityyouthmapping.org/ or http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.gov/assessment-youthmapping.htm.

Step 2: Conduct a needs assessment and target community members who might be able to help.

Before contacting potential supporters, assess and prioritize the resources that your program needs in order to best support its participants and fulfill its mission. What resources are needed right now? What can wait? Look over your list of potential supporters and identify those who might be able to help address priority needs. For example, if a program finds that tutors are a priority, the local college and the business with an employee volunteer program would be good community members to contact first.

Step 3: Develop a strategy for engaging the support of qualified community members. In

preparing to approach community members, consider the following questions:[19]

- *Are the mission and overall vision of this organization aligned with your program's mission and vision?* Although not all community partners will have a similar mission statement, those who understand and believe in your program will be more likely to partner with and support you in the long run.
- *What are your expectations for a relationship with this partner?* Develop clear expectations of what you would like before asking for support. At the same time, remain open to suggestions.
- *What resources will this partner bring to the relationship? How will you ensure the quality of these resources?* Ultimately, it is the quality, not the quantity, of the partnerships that matters most, which underscores the need to be especially thoughtful about deciding on a partner. Find out if community members have partnered with youth service providers in the past and look into how these partnerships worked out. Additionally, ask the necessary questions. How will the high school guarantee that its computer lab will be made available to you at a certain time each week? How will mentors be trained and monitored?
- *What will your program bring to the relationship?* Do not assume that the community members you are targeting know what your program is or what it does. Highlight your successes and share your plans for the future. In addition, highlight how the relationship will benefit both partners. If approaching a business, for example, note that developing an employee volunteer program can help the business by increasing employee motivation and workplace pride, as well as by demonstrating the business's stake in its community.[20]

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN YOUR PROGRAM USE TO LEVERAGE COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND BUILD SUPPORTIVE PARTNERSHIPS?

Out-of-school time programs often rely heavily on public funding and donated facilities, materials, and time from volunteers. Therefore, fostering strong, mutually beneficial partnerships with community members is vital to building and maintaining a successful program. The following are strategies that programs can use to leverage community resources:

- **Utilize Businesses.**
  - *Access Physical and Financial Resources.* Many large corporations set aside funds for community programs. Support may be provided as monetary donations, gifts of supplies or rent-free use of spaces and equipment. Businesses can highlight their contributions through their Web sites and publications. They may also reasonably expect that your organization will publicize or otherwise highlight their support. This kind of publicity can help to attract additional businesses as partners, because it demonstrates how both out-of-school time programs and outside donors can benefit from developing and promoting collaborations.
  - *Consider Volunteer and Apprenticeship Partnerships.* Businesses may be able to offer support through employee volunteer programs or apprenticeship experiences. Many businesses offer employees the option of using paid time to volunteer with nonprofit organizations.[21] Others offer program participants the opportunity to experience "a day in the life" of an employee or to be part of a more extensive apprenticeship program. Develop these partnerships by seeking out businesses that have a history of hiring young people or a history of successfully partnering with nonprofits. Perhaps start by setting up a meeting with the company's human resources or community relations staff to discuss ways in which out-of-school time program participants can contribute to and learn from the business.

- **Utilize Colleges and Universities.** College students may be interested in contributing time and skills to youth in out-of-school time programs.

➢ *Find Existing Partnerships.* To identify college students who are interested in acting as community partners, contact your local college or university's civic engagement or public service office. Many postsecondary schools have already partnerships with youth service providers and are able to offer college students the opportunity to work with these organizations off campus. Ask about having your program listed in schools' work-study or service-learning online databases or posting a flier about your program in the relevant offices.

➢ *Stress Mutual Benefits and the Importance of Commitment.* To engage college students, it is essential to make them aware of how your program benefits youth, as well as how contributing time to your program might benefit them. To do this, present partnering as an opportunity for college students to broaden their résumés and experiences, and stress the skills and opportunities that they will gain. Be willing to provide letters of reference. At the same time, be wary of students who are interested in participating only for one semester or students who may have to miss mentoring sessions. Stress the benefits of long-term, high-quality mentoring relationships and the potential harm of short-term, weaker relationships.[22]

- **Utilize Other Youth Service Providers in the Community.** Many and diverse organizations work and interact with youth, including local government agencies (police, probation, social service, etc.), drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, religious institutions, and homeless shelters. Communication and collaboration among programs may serve to further the missions of all. In working with other youth service providers:

  ➢ *Ask for and Provide Referrals.*
    o Share information about your program with other youth service providers—its name, location, the services it provides, the youth who might benefit most, and contact information.
    o Research other youth service providers, and refer your participants to qualified programs and support services that meet their interests and/or needs.
    o Ask other youth service providers to refer interested youth to your program. If someone whom they refer and have a good relationship with joins your program, ask for their support in engaging and retaining him or her.

  ➢ *Combine and Share Resources.* Multiple youth service providers may be able to share the same spaces, services, and/or supplies. Organizers might share technical expertise, discussion topics, or ideas about field trips. Police officers or drug counselors might give talks or host question-and-answer sessions. Homeless shelters and soup kitchens offer meaningful community-service opportunities for youth. Out-of-school time programs serving older youth might consider partnerships with groups that serve younger children, creating job or tutoring opportunities for teens.

- **Utilize Elementary and Secondary Schools.** Schools can offer important resources to out-of-school time programs through shared facilities, staff, and materials.

  ➢ *Focus on Communication and Collaboration.* Work with teachers and other staff members to develop curricula or activities that complement but do not replicate what is being taught during the school day. Ask teachers, guidance counselors, and school psychologists to refer students to the program or offer suggestions on how to best support students already in the program. By sharing success stories and student work, out-of-school time programs may also be able to alter negative perceptions that teachers and staff may have of program participants.

➢ *Respectfully Take Advantage of Shared Resources.* Schools can potentially offer out-of-school time programs a wealth of physical resources, from rent-free spaces, such as libraries, computer labs, kitchens, and classrooms, to books, equipment, markers, and other supplies. When using school resources, however, beware of leaving messy classrooms or damaged equipment and supplies.

▪ **Utilize Parents and Other Adults.** Parental involvement in out-of-school time programs is important for children and adolescents' engagement and continued attendance, but parents and other adults in your community can also contribute to the activities and scope of out-of-school time programs by volunteering, providing resources, and other activities.
➢ *Open Communication.* Engage parents in formal and impromptu conversations and offer an array of activities through which they can contribute their skills and abilities. Whereas some parents and other adults may not be interested in or qualified to help with academic activities, they may be willing to help with athletic, crafts, or holiday activities. Consider circulating a "Community Engagement" flier each month or quarter that includes information about program successes and opportunities for adults in the neighborhood to participate in program activities.
➢ *Offer Incentives.* Host potluck suppers, barbecues, and other get-togethers where parents and other adults can meet peers interested in building community in their neighborhood. Give parents and other interested adults ownership in the program by inviting them to participate in planning committees, advisory boards, or focus groups. Address transportation issues that may act as a barrier to participation.

REMEMBER THESE STRATEGIES FOR LEVERAGING COMMUNITY RESOURCES:

▪ **Utilize Businesses:** Look to businesses for monetary donations, gifts of supplies, and the use of rent-free spaces. Make partnerships public in order to attract the attention of other businesses. Businesses may also be able to assist through volunteer programs or mentoring and apprenticeship opportunities.
▪ **Utilize Colleges and Universities:** Contact your local college or university's civic engagement or public service office and ask about having your program listed as a public service opportunity. Make students aware of how your program benefits youth, as well as how volunteering with your program will benefit them. Be wary of students who cannot fully commit to mentoring.
▪ **Utilize Other Youth Service Providers in the Community:** Share information about your program with other youth service providers and learn about their programs. Refer your program participants to other qualified programs and support services that meet their interests and needs, and ask other youth service providers to refer interested youth to your program. Share resources when possible.
▪ **Utilize Elementary and Secondary Schools:** Ask teachers, guidance counselors, and school psychologists to refer students. Work with teachers to develop complementary programs and to support the needs of individual students. Respectfully take advantage of school resources, such as classrooms and computers.
▪ **Utilize Parents and Other Adults:** Communicate frequently with parents and other adults, both formally and informally. Encourage their participation through incentives such as shared meals, transportation, and opportunities for leadership. Offer a wide variety of ways for parents and other adults to share their skills and abilities.

- **Harvard Family Research Project—Out-of-School Time Learning and Development Project/OST Evaluation Database**
  This project and its associated database provide both information and research findings about out-of-school time programs, as well as a number of out-of-school time program evaluations. Information is available at: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/about.html.

- **National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST)**
  NIOST is a central clearinghouse of information on practices in out-of-school time programs nationwide. The organization's "Publications" section on its Web site highlights current research on out-of-school time programs. Available at: http://www.niost.org/.

- **Child Trends**
  The Program Providers portal on the Child Trends website at http://www.childtrends.org/ features many *Research-to-Results* briefs of particular interest to out-of-school time programs. For example:
    - *Building, Engaging, and Supporting Family and Parental Involvement in Out-of-School Time Programs* provides a more in-depth look at how to engage families in out-of-school time programs.
    - *Recruiting Mentors in Out-of-School Time Programs: What's Involved?* provides details on how to ensure an effective mentoring program.

In The Spotlight
Program: Communities In Schools of the Nation's Capital
Location: Washington, DC

The following is an interview with **Darrel Jones,** the Executive Director of *Communities In Schools of the Nation's Capital*, who describes his experiences with community involvement.

What is Communities In Schools? Communities In Schools (CIS), founded in 1977, is the nation's largest dropout prevention organization. Its mission is to identify and address the unmet needs of young people by mobilizing existing community resources and creating partnerships for the benefit of students and their families. CIS works with 3,400 schools across the country, serving 1.2 million children per year in 200 communities and in 27 states. Communities In Schools of the Nation's Capital is an affiliate of the national organization. [23]

How does CIS identify the needs of the schools with which it works? Because needs vary from school to school, CIS does not go into schools with prescribed recommendations. We begin with an assessment of the school, during which our staff speak with the school's administration and guidance counselors to determine what resources are needed most. Only after completing this assessment do we begin the search for resources. We continue to work closely with the school long after the original assessment has been completed. When new needs arise, we move quickly to find a way to meet them.

How does CIS identify community resources and begin building supportive partnerships? First, we identify resources that exist in the community but are not being brought into the school. For example, we look to existing nonprofits and to corporations with a philanthropic interest. We meet with them, tell them who we are, what we do, how we are trying to meet the needs of a particular school, and what they can do to help. When they hear that our model has been working for 30 years, they are usually more eager to get involved. Once an organization has agreed to help, we broker a memorandum of understanding (MOU), a formalized agreement that allows us to monitor and maintain the relationship. In this way, we make sure that the service provider is doing what it said it would do. If we cannot find services locally, we broaden our search until we can.

What is involved in leveraging partnerships to meet the needs of schools and students? We use research-based best practices in order to leverage resources in the most efficient manner possible. These practices vary depending on whom we are trying to engage—families, elected officials, religious leaders, and so forth. We learn about these practices through the training and technical assistance provided by our national office.

How long do the relationships between a school and its community partners last? It depends on the nature of the service that is being provided. In some cases, the relationship can last for years, and this is great. But, as in the case of a job fair or an assembly, the duration of the service may be very short-term, lasting only a day or a semester.

What challenges has CIS faced as it works to access resources for schools?
- *Conflicts with other nonprofits.* In the District of Columbia, especially, there is a great deal of competition for resources. One of our challenges is getting other nonprofits to understand that we do not work in competition with them but in cooperation. We try to coordinate resources so that they are delivered in the most efficient and effective way possible. Sometimes this means explaining to a service provider that more needs would be met if the provider put its efforts elsewhere, for example, in one school rather than in another school.
- *Communicating the community-wide impact of the dropout crisis.* The public does not understand the impact that the dropout crisis has. They see it as a personal problem, not as a community problem. Our challenge is making the extent of the crisis clear to the community at large, how we as a society will suffer if we do not address it. We get this message out as often as we possibly can, speaking with whomever will listen. We are looking to develop a media strategy but have not had the resources to do so yet.
- *Making it about more than just pure academics.* Lately, there has been an incredible focus on academic success. Our challenge is to make people understand that academic success cannot be treated in isolation. Much of what happens in the classroom is determined by what happens outside of the classroom. Not all of a school's needs are academic; other needs must also be met in order for students to be effective in the classroom.

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