THE ENGAGED COMMUNITY: SCHOOL COLLABORATION
FOR DEVELOPING THE WHOLE CHILD

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The Engaged Community: School Collaboration for Developing the Whole Child

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Collaboration and coordination among the community of professionals within schools are arguably the most important factors in addressing the comprehensive needs of students, families, schools and communities. Since the education system has a mandate and a shared responsibility to fully prepare students for college, career and citizenship -- the ‘whole child’ -- collaboration and coordination are the pivot upon which that mission turns. Yet these are among the most challenging goals for professionals to achieve. Every aspect of educational improvement involves the ability of people to effectively work together for positive change. With skilled leadership that harnesses the creativity and basic motivation of people to apply new knowledge in solving problems, collaboration can result in powerful and positive long-term change.

Expectations for collaborative practices in schools from pre-kindergarten to high school are embedded in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), and state and local policies designed to protect the civil rights of all students, and ensure appropriate and quality educational services for all.

What is Collaboration?

Based on the Latin root *col-laboratus* means to work (*laboratus*) together (*col*) (Random House, 2001) collaboration can be defined as work done jointly with others. Collaboration has been defined in a variety of ways involving common themes that include: (1) new *relationships* among people; (2) *sharing of resources* (human or other);
(3) trust among people working together in peer (non-hierarchical) relationships; (4) joint decision making and actions; (5) joint responsibility for outcomes; (6) achieving specific results or change

‘Collaboration’ conjurs up within us images of people sharing experiences and solving problems together in constructive ways. It also involves people coming together in new combinations -- perhaps people who have never worked together before – to stimulate new thinking and new ideas. Collaboration is generally defined as a process of participation through which people, groups and community agencies work together to achieve a set of agreed upon results (Kochhar-Bryant, 2007). This process often involves (a) new ideas about how people can work together to improve teaching and learning, student development and achievement, and the engagement of community service agencies; (b) new philosophies about how to blend a variety of perspectives and values among people to make things possible for students, families, professionals, schools and systems; (c) practical strategies and processes through which people can effect change, solve problems or improve practices; and (d) commitment to embracing new ideas and working together constructively.

Collaboration can be thought of as the ‘people part’ and system coordination as the ‘organizational,’ or broader system part, but they are inextricably linked. At the heart of effective and long lasting school collaboration are effective relationships among range of people within schools and human service agencies in the community that serve children and families.

Who Is Involved In School Collaboration?
No longer a trite notion, educational leaders and parents know that it does indeed take a whole school to work toward successful collaboration for building a student-centered holistic approach to education. At the heart of effective and long lasting school collaboration are effective relationships among all professionals within the school environment -- administrators, teachers, parents, the students, general and special education teachers, para-educators, related services specialists, nurses, counselors, librarians, physical education teachers, technical specialists, custodians, food service personnel, and trades professionals. Outside of the school setting, human service agencies essential for comprehensive planning for students, include community mental health services, social services, family services, public health services, alternative school programs, substance abuse services, post-secondary institutions, and career-vocational services. Each of these groups within and outside the school community must be engaged to support the development of the whole student.

Why is Collaboration Central to Achieving the Whole Child Approach?

Collaboration has become increasingly central to the whole child initiative for multiple reasons. The education and human service system has become more complex and more difficult for families to navigate when their children need specialized services and supports. There remain gaps in the service system when students need supportive services within the school or from external community agencies in order to participate and progress in education and social settings and function as independently as possible. For decades the terms `abyss', `chasm', or `cracks' in the service system have referred to the perplexing challenges for educators, support service personnel, students and families:
a. The frustrations and anxieties that arise when a single individual in need must acquire special education services and supports from several separate and uncoordinated sources within and external to the school;

b. Weak links between schools and community service agencies. There may be no single access or entry point to help the individual and family identify and select the services they need and understand eligibility and access processes.

c. The risk that students, families and teachers will be unable to find educational support services because of absolute gaps in services (e.g., absence of health services in the school; lack of para-educators, absence of needed technology, inadequate transportation to services agencies in a rural or remote area);

d. Important ‘transitions’ in the child’s development from early childhood programs through high school graduation requiring close communication and collaboration to provide specialized supports (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Aspel, Bettis, Test, & Wood, 1998; Kochhar-Bryant & Greene, 2009).

e. The differences among families in their capacity to access and effectively use services within the system (Allen, 2009).

f. Structures within schools that separate professionals from one another, students from professionals, and families from professionals.

The traditional structure of schools can promote isolation among professional groups and impede collaboration. These gaps occur when components of the educational ‘system’ system do not connect in a manner that promotes the child’s fullest potential
within the educational continuum. For example, special and general educators have traditionally taught in separate rooms or buildings. Guidance counselors and school counselors have traditionally functioned independently of the instructional program. These separations are partly due to the fact that historically, different components of the educational system have ‘evolved’ separately. Factors that separate them and prevent them from effective collaboration are rooted in differences in their roles, professional ‘languages’ or terminology, expectations for students, policies that guide them, practices, and backgrounds and training of personnel. Examples of these separations or gaps include:

- curriculum separated into disciplines such as history, social studies, English, mathematics, science
- special education and regular education
- academic curriculum and vocational-technical curriculum
- academic and functional (life skills) curriculum
- classroom based learning and community-based learning
- standardized assessment and performance-based assessment
- academic planning and transition planning

In many schools these structures serve to sort or separate students who have different end-goals or graduation outcomes (college preparation vs employment or vocational-technical college upon graduation). In some cases they are designed to provide options and choices for students, providing pathways, or different opportunities for students of different abilities to complete high school and earn diplomas. They also provide alternatives to traditional academic assessments so that all students’ achievement and
performance of all students can be measured. Many schools across the nation, however, are making exciting attempts to bridge these chasms that separate people, and therefore educational processes, for both teachers and students. Many promising strategies involve collaboration and coordination across content areas, programs, and units. Appendix A provides a case illustration of a middle school that is working to bridge these gaps.

**Collaboration Creates a Shared Responsibility and Improves Conditions for Learning**

Collaboration has gained increasing attention because research demonstrates that people accomplish more and make better decisions when they work together intentionally on behalf of students. Collaborative teams have many advantages over individuals working in isolation, since people with different expertise and perspectives on students tend to be better at solving problems and have a higher level of commitment to new ideas and strategies (Blank & Berg, 2006; Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel, & Dyck, 2009; Kochhar-Bryant, 2008; Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001; Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O’Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2014; Wenger & McDermott, 2002).

Research also indicates that active parent and family engagement strongly predicts students’ school success. Efforts to build respectful, cooperative relationships among parents, families, teachers and school administrators help family members feel more capable of contributing to their child’s education and connected to their child’s school. When families are supported in their parenting role, their involvement in their children's learning increases and student performance is strengthened.
Schools and school-linked agencies are finding that as they improve their work together, outcomes for students improve as well. A shared responsibility and shared approaches to addressing student educational and developmental needs -- helping the ‘whole child’ -- bring to bear the combined thinking, planning and resources of all who support the development of students and families (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001). There is a growing recognition of the economic value of sharing resources across agencies to close persistent gaps in services for children and families who need them. Schools across the U.S. are working to establish agreements and sustain interagency relationships that support student education and transitions through the educational pathway (Fowler, Donegan, Lueke, Hadden & Phillips, 2000; Kohler, 2003; Kochhar-Bryant, 2003).

In summary, the concepts of collaboration and coordination are not simply pleasing abstractions -- they lead to innovative practices, new relationships and improved outcomes for students and families. Clear objectives, goals or ends are essential, as clarity of purpose is often the key ingredient in the success of a collaborative effort for a whole child initiative.
Appendix A: Case Illustration

Creation of an ‘Engaged School Community’ For the Whole Child

The Horizons Middle School embarked on an ambitious initiative that would engage all personnel within the school in new ways -- from administrators, to teachers, to support personnel and parents – to support student academic, social and general development. Professional development was provided to include all personnel and how they could contribute to creating an 'engaged community’ that shared full responsibility for addressing the holistic needs of students. A central theme was that the ‘engaged community’ was comprised of caring adults in the environment who took a personal interest in each student throughout their educational pathway. Caring adults would develop positive relationships that intentionally reinforced academic achievement and social, civic, ethical, and emotional development. New expectations for engagement of groups of professionals were as follows:

*Teachers, special educators and paraeducators.* Infused social-emotional, health, and safety related content into the curriculum, and focused on personalized learning, positive relationships with students and engagement of families in the education of their children. They worked with education support personnel to create connections between the curriculum and other aspects of school life in order to promote relationships and reinforce learning.

*Principals and administrators.* Initiated holistic educational goals for all personnel, communicated school wide themes, and emphasized positive relationships with students and parents. Provided resources for creative initiatives.
Health and Student Services. Nurses helped teachers integrate health related content into the curriculum and held ‘health-talks’ with students, and developed health promotion materials and tools. School counselors and community outreach specialists worked to develop stronger linkages with service agencies in the community, and helped teachers integrate social-emotional content into the curriculum.

Clerical, technical and library personnel. These personnel worked together in teams to develop displays, materials and ways to communicate with students and families about services in the school and communities and how better to connect them. They worked to create new ideas for engaging families in the school through media and in the library.

Custodial, transportation and trades personnel. Were provided strategies to demonstrate positive behavior within the school and on buses, focus on positive relationships with students, and refer students to appropriate school personnel when they see evidence of students in need.

Food Service personnel. Were challenged to create innovative ways to promote healthy foods and to create educational visuals with information about food values along the cafeteria line.

[see: http://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2015/01/08/Gateway-High-School-cafe-serves-up-more-than-coffee/stories/201501080009 ]

Security and safety personnel. Were asked to create innovative ways to promote safe behavior, increase awareness of unsafe behavior, prevent unsafe situations, hold ‘safety talks’ with students, and help teachers integrate safety-related information into the curriculum.
The implementation of collaborative teams and goals did not occur in a tidy, step-by-step manner, but instead was messy, complex, and at times unpredictable. However, the initial challenges and instability led to creative thinking, close collaboration and unity among personnel who had not worked together previously, and led to new leadership among staff. It also resulted in new relationships, practices and policies that were unprecedented for the school. An interdependence emerged among people working together for a common purpose – the student as a whole person, and not just test scores which previously were viewed as the sole responsibility of teachers and administrators. The culture and organization of the school was permanently changed --- everyone was now responsible for student development in the broadest sense. This experience with collaborative engagement also established new patterns of relationships very different from the traditional isolation and independent work that had been characteristic of teachers, support personnel, and parents in the past.

References


**Book Link**

Link to Kochhar-Bryant, C.A. (2008). *Collaboration and System Coordination for Students with Special Needs: From Early Childhood to the Postsecondary Years*

http://www.amazon.com/Collaboration-System-Coordination-Students-Special/dp/0131145193/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1420908209&sr=1-
collaboration and system coordination for students with special needs