

# Chapter 1

## Community Involvement: Why and What?

The notion that the community has a role to play in the education of youth is long standing in the United States. From Dewey's concept of community schools at the turn of the century to calls for community control from parents and community activists in the late 1960s, community involvement has been a central theme in educational reform. Today, community involvement has taken on renewed significance in configurations and discussions of school improvement. Federal, state, and local educational legislation; political slogans; professional addresses; and casual conversations about schooling are likely to include references to the role or responsibility of the community. Why has community involvement had such longevity in educational reform and discourse? I describe four compelling reasons below.

### **Rationales for Community Involvement in Schools**

Within the theoretical and conceptual literature, a number of rationales for community involvement in schools exists. Proponents of such involvement emphasize its importance for effective school functioning; economic competitiveness; student well being; and community health and development. When describing the importance of community involvement for effective school functioning, proponents most often focus on the mounting responsibilities placed on schools by a nation with children and youth who are increasingly placed "at risk." According to Shore (1994), "Too many schools and school systems are

failing to carry out their basic educational mission. Many of them—both in urban and rural settings—are overwhelmed by the social and emotional needs of children who are growing up in poverty (p.2).”

Proponents argue that schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students, and that these resources, both human and material, are housed in students’ communities (Epstein, 1995; Melaville, 1998; Waddock, 1995). They contend that the traditional isolated way that many schools have functioned is anachronistic in a time of changing family demographics, an increasingly demanding workplace, and growing student diversity (Ascher, 1988; Crowson & Boyd, 1993; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987, 1996; Kirst & McLaughlin, 1990). Ascher (1988), for example, called for an expanded vision of those who should participate in the task of educating our nation’s students. This vision calls for schools that are open to involvement by the local and wider community and that are responsive to community needs.

Arguments for community involvement to improve school functioning are closely linked to those that emphasize the importance of community involvement for U.S. economic competitiveness. Proponents of this view argue that a primary responsibility of schools is to prepare the nation’s workforce. A well-educated workforce is seen as vital to economic productivity and expansion. This view of the role of schools is generally accepted in the U.S. and has been central to national educational legislation and policy for decades.

Community involvement is seen as one way to help schools produce a more capable workforce. According to proponents of this view, jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century exist in increasingly complicated environments and require workers who are competent beyond a basic skills level. Students need advanced language, technical, and communication skills to succeed in the kinds of jobs that are currently available. Proponents argue that school-community partnerships, specifically those that involve businesses, are critically important because business leaders, managers, and personnel are uniquely equipped to help schools prepare students for the changing workplace (Fitzgerald, 1997; Hopkins & Wendel, 1997; Nasworthy & Rood, 1990).

Merz and Furman (1997) described this reform perspective as “gesellschaftlich” in nature because the schooling process is viewed from an instrumental perspective. That is, schools are seen primarily as a means to serve national economic interests by preparing students for the workplace. They contrast this perspective with gemeinschaft reform values that emphasize relationships, interpersonal connections, and providing students with a sense of purpose and belonging in society. For many of its proponents, community involvement is seen as one way to restore gemeinschaft values to the schooling process. These values are viewed as fundamental to creating schools that nurture the wellbeing of children and youth.

Proponents of community involvement for student wellbeing argue that because of changes in the structure and function of U.S. families and neighborhoods, many children and youth, regardless of socioeconomic background, are growing up without the social capital necessary for their healthy development. Social capital is created and exchanged through positive, caring

relationships in which knowledge, guidance, and values are shared (Coleman, 1987, 1988). Proponents of community involvement for student wellbeing argue that schools can increase students' social capital through their connections with students' communities (Benson, 1996; McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994; Toffler and Toffler, 1995). They contend that through a variety of community volunteer and service integration programs, schools can become islands of hope for students whose social environments are increasingly stressed and fragmented (Dryfoos, 1998, 2002, 2003; Nettles, 1991).

Finally, some proponents argue that community involvement in schools is important for building and maintaining healthy communities. When discussing the role of school-community collaborations in rural communities, Combs & Bailey (1992) argued that as often the "largest and most visible institution[s] in the rural community" schools should be involved in the community/economic development process. They contended that the educational, social, and recreational needs of the adult rural population can be enhanced by utilizing local school facilities and expertise. In turn, they argued, schools can use the community as a learning resource (Bauch, 2001).

Keith (1996) similarly argued for a new conceptualization of community involvement in schools. She argued that schools should develop horizontal ties with the community to foster the "social networks, educational, and economic opportunities and cultural richness (p. 254)" that is central to social and economic growth. Benson (1996) also suggested that community development should be a goal of school-community collaborations, because such collaborations require

healthy communities in order to be successful in serving youth. Benson defines healthy communities as those that have not only strong socio-economic and service infrastructures, but also are rich in social capital.

## **Community Involvement in Schools: Form and Fashion**

### Community Partnership Foci

The different rationales for community involvement can be realized through a variety of partnership activities. School-community partnerships can be student-centered, family-centered, school-centered, community-centered, or any combination of these. Student-centered activities include those that provide direct services or goods to students, for example, student awards and incentives, scholarships, tutoring and mentoring programs, after-school enrichment programs, and job-shadowing and other career-focused activities. Family-centered activities are those that have parents or entire families as their primary focus. This category includes activities such as parenting workshops, GED and other adult education classes, parent/family incentives and awards, family counseling, and family fun and learning nights. School-centered activities are those that benefit the school as a whole, such as beautification projects or the donation of school equipment and materials, or activities that benefit the faculty, such as staff development and classroom assistance. Community-centered activities have as their primary focus the community and its citizens, for example, charitable outreach, art and science exhibits in community venues, and community revitalization and beautification projects (see Table 1.1).

***[Insert Table 1.1 here]***

Survey research of 443 school members of the National Network of Partnership Schools in 1998<sup>1</sup> revealed much about the focus of schools' partnership efforts. Overall, most schools reported that their community partnership activities were student-centered. This finding suggests that schools may focus their partnership activities too narrowly. Schools may not have fully explored collaborative activities to benefit the total school program or to assist in providing adults in students' families with primary services, skills training, or other parental supports. Such school- and family-centered partnership activities might be especially important for high-need/resource-poor schools.

The community-centered category was the least represented of the four, indicating that many schools had not developed partnership activities that served the larger community. Developing two-way or reciprocal school-community partnership activities is a key challenge for schools as they work to improve and expand their programs of school, family, and community partnership (Epstein, et

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 443 schools in the sample, about one-third were located in large cities (34%), over one-quarter were located in suburban areas (27%); 20% were located in small cities, and about 19% were located in rural areas. The majority (70%) were elementary schools serving only students from pre-kindergarten to grade 6; 14% were middle schools that include only students from grades 4-9; 7% were high schools with students between grades 9 and 12; and 9% were schools that serve students from a range of grade levels. Sixty-five percent of the schools in the sample receive some Title 1 funds, and 43% were school-wide Title 1 programs. One-third of the schools reported that their students' families spoke between two and five languages other than English. For a full description of the study, see Sanders, M. G. (2001). A study of the role of "community" in comprehensive school, family, and community partnership programs. *The Elementary School Journal*, 102 (1), 19-34.

al., 2002). Through community-focused activities, schools, families, and students can contribute to the larger community, and serve as catalysts for community action and development.

### Potential Community Partners

Schools can collaborate with a variety of community partners to plan and implement partnership activities. The survey of NNPS schools helped to generate the categories of partners identified in Table 2. These partners include (1) large corporations and small businesses; (2) universities and educational institutions; (3) government and military agencies; (4) health care organizations; (5) faith-based organizations; (6) national service and volunteer organizations; (7) senior citizen organizations; (8) cultural and recreational institutions; (9) media organizations; (10) sports franchises and associations; (11) other groups such as fraternities and sororities; and (12) community volunteers that can provide resources and social support to youth and schools (Table 1.2).

***[Insert Table 1.2 about here]***

The over 400 NNPS school members surveyed reported 817 school-community partnership activities. Of these, the greatest proportion (366 or 45%) involved one or more business partners. These included small and large local businesses, such as bakeries, groceries, barbershops, funeral homes, beauty salons, banks, utility companies, and florists, as well as national corporations and

franchises, such as LensCrafters, IBM, State Farm Insurance, General Motors, Walmart, AT&T, Pizza Hut, Burger King, and McDonald's.

Seventy-seven (9%) of the reported school-community activities included universities, colleges, and other educational institutions, including neighboring schools. Health care organizations, including hospitals, mental health facilities, and health foundations were involved in 68 (8%) of the reported school-community activities. Government and military agencies were partners in 62 (8%) of the activities. Examples of government and military agencies include fire and police departments, chambers of commerce, and other state and local agencies and departments.

National service and volunteer organizations, including Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, Americorp, Concerned Black Men, Inc., the Urban League, and Boys and Girls Clubs were involved in 49 (6%) of the school-community partnership activities described by schools in the National Network. Faith organizations such as churches, synagogues, and religious charities, participated in 47 (6%) of the reported activities. Senior citizens organizations were involved in 25(3%) of the 817 school-community activities reported. Zoos, libraries, recreational centers, museums, and other cultural and recreational institutions participated in 20 (2%) of the reported activities.

Media organizations and sports franchises also were represented among the reported community partners, albeit in smaller numbers. Other community-based organizations, including sororities and fraternities, alumni organizations, neighborhood associations, and local service organizations were involved in 79



(10%) of the activities. Nineteen (2%) of the reported activities included individuals in the school community volunteering their time, energy, and talents.

As described above, schools in the sample relied heavily on businesses and corporations as their partners. Schools' preference for business partners may be due to their greater visibility, availability, and familiarity. However, this reliance on business partners may result in schools underutilizing other community partners who also may provide goods and services to their faculties, students, and families. For example, there were noticeably few cultural and recreational institutions among the many partners that were reported. Similarly, activities that included faith-based organizations, media organizations, and national service and volunteer organizations as partners were limited. These findings suggest that schools may need to broaden their definition of "community," and reach out to organizations that are less visible than businesses, but are equally interested in partnering with schools.

Survey data also suggest that schools may currently not make the most of their community partnerships. For example, most partnership activities with senior citizens' organizations involved students visiting senior citizens' facilities. Few partnership activities gave senior citizens opportunities to provide services and information to schools, families, and students. In addition to broadening their definitions of "community," then, schools also need to expand their visions of how community partners can help them to facilitate school improvement and students' success.

## Range of Complexity in Community Partnerships

The kinds of community partnerships that schools implement can vary in complexity. If viewed on a continuum, simple partnerships on the far left end are characterized by short-term exchanges of goods or services (see Fig. 1). Such partnerships require very little coordination, planning, or cultural and structural shifts in school functioning. Thus, they are relatively easy to implement, especially for schools that may lack the experience needed for more complex school-community partnerships. When well implemented, their impact is likely to be positive, albeit, limited.

***[Insert Figure 1.1 about here]***

Community partnership activities increase in complexity as you move along the continuum. Activities located in the middle of the continuum might include a partnership between an elementary school and a local library to provide a series of parent workshops on supporting children's literacy development at a variety of community sites. This partnership activity may require several meetings over time to identify appropriate topics, materials, and venues, as well as to plan, schedule, publicize, and evaluate the events.

On the far right end of the continuum, activities are long-term and characterized by bi- or multi-directional exchange, high levels of interaction, and extensive planning and coordination (see Fig. 1.1). For example community resources and supports can be integrated with educational services in the form of

full-service community schools. Several variations of community schools exist. These include (a) school-based health clinics, facilities that provide health counseling, education, and services in school buildings operated by outside health agencies; (b) school-based youth centers, centers that provide after-school, recreational, mentoring, employment, and other needed services to students in extended day programs; and (c) family resource centers, facilities located in schools where parents can receive supports and services such as employment assistance, immigration information, food, clothing, counseling, and early child care (Dryfoos, 1998). As described in the following chapter, partnerships as complex as school-based integrated services may require that additional personnel be hired to coordinate and oversee program implementation and evaluation.

### **Obstacles to Community Partnerships**

A number of obstacles to school-community partnerships exists. Some obstacles may be more prevalent at some schools than others. Schools must address these obstacles before they can maximize the benefits of their connections with community members, businesses, and organizations.

Cushing and Kohl (1997) identified three barriers to successful school-community collaborations: (a) fear of public scrutiny, (b) staff burnout, and (c) teachers' and administrators' negative perceptions of students' families and communities. Mawhinney (1994) and Epstein (1995) also identified barriers to effective collaborations with the community. According to these authors, one of

the most pervasive hindrances to collaboration is territorialism, or, as Crowson and Boyd (1993, p. 152) noted, “unresolved issues of information sharing, resource mingling and professional turf.”

The survey data gathered from 443 NNPS school members highlighted additional barriers to the successful implementation of school-community partnerships. When asked what obstacles they faced in developing and expanding their community partnership activities, 233 schools responded. Only 18% of these respondents reported that they faced no obstacles in planning and implementing partnership activities. Most reported several obstacles including insufficient participation, time, community resources, leadership, funding, communication, and focus. In this section, I briefly discuss these obstacles and recommended strategies to address them.

## Participation

Nearly one-third (30%) of respondents who reported challenges identified insufficient participation as an obstacle to school-community partnerships. Similar to findings reported by Cushing and Kohl, some respondents noted that involving school faculty was a challenge. However, others reported that involving families, students, and community members also was a problem as the following responses illustrate.

We (the ATP) asked teachers to each contact two businesses for a Book Plate Drive, they all refused. . . . Teachers feel they do enough (School #29).

Since our district is so spread out, we have a difficult time getting people to go to different community activities (School #474).

Our reading program got off to a very slow start. We had difficulty getting community members to volunteer to assist our youngsters (School#195).

Several survey respondents identified strategies to improve participation in school-community activities. Some suggested reaching out beyond faculty members to volunteers for help in coordinating partnership activities. Some suggested using local media and school newsletters to increase awareness of activities. Still others mentioned making reminder phone calls, encouraging participants to bring friends to activities, and providing door prizes and other incentives for participation. Other strategies included changing the time of activities to accommodate more interested individuals; organizing Saturday as well as weekday functions; providing transportation, food, and baby-sitting services; and using community facilities for activities.

#### Lack of Time

A second, and perhaps related obstacle was that of insufficient time. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of school respondents reported that they found it difficult to find time to meet, identify, and contact potential community partners and to implement partnership activities. According to these respondents:

Our big challenge is having time to approach businesses in the area (School #93).

It is difficult finding time to create more partnerships or different ones (School #101).

We need more time to contact organizations and encourage their involvement. We also need time for staff to work with agencies and parents (School #124).

Time is a challenge. The time that the Downtown Merchant's Association can meet (between 8:30-9:15) is when we are teaching (School #133).

Respondents offered several strategies to address the time limitations many schools faced. They suggested that schools identify a wider range of staff and parent and community volunteers to plan and implement activities. Some respondents also suggested that schools utilize a team approach so that the tasks of planning, implementing, and evaluating partnership activities can be shared among its members. Furthermore, the respondents suggested that school-based teams plan activities in the spring or summer of each school year so that they are ready to implement activities in the fall.

#### Community resources

About 12% of respondents reported identifying community partners as a primary obstacle to school-community partnerships. Some of these respondents noted that they were located in resource-poor communities with few businesses and other community-based organizations. Others reported that competition from other schools made finding partners difficult, and still others indicated that their students were bussed into the school, which made community partners difficult to identify. The respondents explained:

We are in competition with 12 other schools seeking partnerships with businesses in our community (School #95).

Our challenge is limited business/industry to draw on (School #330).

Ours is a small, rural area that is in an economically distressed area. Community partners are difficult to find. (School #475).

To address the obstacle of limited community resources, some respondents encouraged schools to identify community partners other than businesses and corporations. Table 2 is a resource that schools can use to consider other potential partners. Respondents also noted that schools can learn more about available community resources by attending local community events and meetings, including those of their local Chambers of Commerce. Other respondents emphasized the importance of schools networking with individuals within and outside their immediate geographic area to secure partners.

### Leadership

Some respondents (8%) found that inadequate leadership was an obstacle. They reported that without an individual or individuals to lead in the development, evaluation, and maintenance of school-community partnership activities, coordinating and sustaining such activities was challenging. Typical responses were:

We need leadership within the school to develop the necessary relationships (School #336)

We need a coordinator to work with the Rotary Club and the school (School #259).

Our biggest challenge is time and consistent leadership. (School #667)

The most frequently reported strategy to address insufficient leadership was to involve other school groups, like the school leadership council or Parent-

Teacher Association (PTA), in the planning and implementation of school-community partnerships. School respondents also suggested building a wide and diverse pool of leaders by providing training on school, family, and community partnerships to the entire school staff, as well as interested parents and community members.

## Funding

Some respondents (8%) also viewed funding as an obstacle. They stated:

We need an operating budget (School #72).

Lack of funds was our biggest challenge (School #a107).

Finding the funds needed to provide materials, trips, speakers, and/or incentives is difficult (School #a045).

Many respondents suggested using PTA, PTO, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Communities, Safe and Drug Free Schools, and/or Title 1 funds; soliciting donations from businesses; and holding fund-raisers. Others suggested applying for small and large grants to secure funding for partnership activities. Parent and community coordinators in some district and state offices and departments of education offer such grants. In addition, excellent websites for finding grant making organizations to support school-based activities include *The Center for Education Reform*, <http://www.edreform.com/info/grant.htm> and *Grants for NonProfits: Education*, <http://www.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/2educat.htm>. Other respondents noted that community partners themselves may offset some of the costs associated with partnership activities through the provision of goods and services.



## Communication

A small percentage of respondents identified communication (6%) as a challenge. Although some schools faced this obstacle because of the linguistic diversity of their student and family populations, others found it difficult to communicate in a timely manner to increase participation in activities. Schools reported:

We found that the language barrier between many families and English-speaking community members was a challenge (School #231).

Parent attendance at community activities was poor due to the lack of communication (School #a162).

To improve communication, some school respondents suggested using students to make reminder phone calls; using interpreters to translate written notices and information provided at school-community activities and meetings; and using a variety of communication sources, for example, newsletters, newspapers, television, and radio, to convey information about partnership opportunities and activities.

## Focus

A few respondents (3%) also identified insufficient focus as an obstacle. That so few respondents identified this area as an obstacle may reflect the current use of site-based management and school improvement plans that identify school goals and foci for the academic year. In fact, the primary strategy

offered to improve the focus of schools' community partnership activities was to link the activities to school improvement goals.

## **Summary**

Community involvement can equip schools to provide students with more relevant, challenging learning opportunities in nurturing environments. Schools can collaborate with a variety of community partners. This chapter identified 12 categories of community partners to help educational leaders think about the "community" more broadly. What is most important in partner selection, however, is that schools identify community partners and develop partnership activities that will help them to achieve goals that support students' learning and school improvement efforts. 'Partnerships for partnerships' sake' will not help a school achieve and maintain excellence.

As discussed in this chapter, school-community partnerships can be long-, or short-term; their activities can be student-, family-, community-, or school-focused; they can require limited or extensive planning. Schools with little or no experience in planning and implementing school-community partnerships should begin with simple activities. As their experience and capacity grow, schools can incorporate increasingly more complex community partnerships as need dictates and opportunity allows. No two schools are exactly alike. The array of community partnerships that each school ultimately achieves, therefore, will be different and should reflect its goals for students' learning and success.

School-community partnerships are not without obstacles. Reported obstacles include insufficient funding; time; and faculty, parent, and community participation. This chapter recommends several strategies that school leaders can implement to address obstacles that commonly arise when developing school-community partnerships (Also see Appendix A). In order to do so, however, they first need to understand factors that can create and exacerbate barriers to successful implementation. These are highlighted in Chapter 2, which looks closely at partnerships between schools and five common community partners: (1) businesses, (2) universities, (3) organizations that provide internships for youth, (4) service agencies and professionals, and (5) faith-based institutions.