Education-Community Partnerships: Who Uses Whom for What Purposes?

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Abstract

An examination of education-community partnerships from the viewpoint of community partners reveals the importance of understanding motivations and expectations for partnership success. The analysis uses a typology of motivations: a continuum from committed to supportive, through indifferent, to protective and exploitive. Three education-community partnerships, two successful and one failed, provide "reality" examples. The lessons learned focus on leadership, goal setting, power relationships, perceptions, context, modeling, and results.

Education partnerships are widespread; their history is long, and through them many things have been accomplished. Whether they are small, informal partnerships working at the school or classroom level or broad, formal, multimember alliances working at systemic levels, partnerships are based on the premise that collective action is stronger than individual actions. Long touted by strategists and increasingly required by funders, partnerships are complicated mechanisms that are easier to create than to sustain. While goal agreement is frequently possible, tactical decisions often create controversy, and demonstrated, lasting results are often hard to achieve.

Most members of education-community partnerships represent education communities—K-12 and postsecondary personnel, education officials and associations, and sometimes parents and families. More recently, as problem definitions expand and expectations broaden, non-education communities have been invited or have demanded to be included. Such members include health and service professionals; business, government, religious, and civic leaders; foundations; ethnic and cultural institutions; and sometimes neighborhood organizations and taxpayers. As more entities join a partnership, collaboration becomes "more messy, filled with ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion" (Fullan 1993).

In education-community partnerships, as in personal relationships, all members are not equal. Much of the leadership and agenda setting comes from the education partners. The voices of non-education communities seem tentative, muted, and sometimes nonexistent. Too often, they envision themselves as subordinate members, useful perhaps but not essential. On occasion, non-education voices are strident if they feel unwelcome, ineffective, or ignored. Whether viewed as supporters or detractors, however, non-education communities have become an accepted, even expected, part of the partnership process.

This article examines the complicated partnership experience primarily from the viewpoint of community partners. It draws upon experiences from three different education-community partnerships: one very successful, one failed, and one growing despite formidable obstacles. All three are designed to bring about substantive changes in teaching and learning in a large, urban school district that serves more than 100,000 students in more than 200 locations. The district is the largest school district in Wisconsin and the twenty-seventh largest district in the nation. Eighty-three percent of students are minority, more than 77 percent receive free or reduced lunches, and 15 percent are special education students. In the year 2001–2002, this district struggled to fill more than 1,000 teacher vacancies.

Goals for all three partnerships include both first- and second- order changes: (1) making current practices more effective and efficient, and (2) shifting values, beliefs, and practices (Cuban 2001). All seek to go beyond the typical cosmetic partnerships that provide a range of useful services and goods, (e.g., advice, equipment, personnel, and funding). All three aspire to be substantive partnerships that "change what people actually do, are led by practitioners, involve a sense of ownership, and lead to definite outcomes" (Smith 2001).

Partnership Elements

In recent decades education-community partnerships have been the focus of increasing academic and political scrutiny. Observed, catalogued, analyzed, and critiqued, partnerships have become the subject of intense interest and debate. The importance of leadership, open communication, mutual respect and trust, a willingness to listen, and long-term commitment are highlighted by current studies as keys to positive outcomes. These factors are clearly evident in the successful aspects of the three examples described in this article. Difficulties relating to governance, interruptions in leadership, turf, power struggles, agenda control, and unrealistic expectations and timelines are also well documented by the experts. These factors are likewise evident in the failures of these three examples (Brown 1994; Corrigan 2000; Russell 2000; Sarasan 1993; Walsh 2000).

There is, however, another group of factors important to understanding education-community partnerships, namely the expectations and motivations various partners bring to the alliance. To a large extent, these reflect important member values that will help or hinder the work of the partnership. Adding to the complexity, partners are likely to change motivations and expectations as the partnership evolves and power relationships shift. While the expectations and motivations of partnership members vary greatly and change over time, many can be grouped along the following continuum: (1) committed, (2) supportive (3) indifferent (4) protective, and (5) exploitive. (Figure 1)



Committed partnerships operate by members sharing ideas, data, power, and accountability for successes and failures over a long period of time. The commitment is strong enough to overcome differences, conflicts, and continuing change. Conflicts are resolved in a cooperative manner. This does not mean that all partners participate equally or to the same degree at all times, but rather that the opportunity to do so is open to everyone. Committed partnerships take time to develop trust and strong resolve to surmount inevitable shifts in what are often complicated power-balancing acts.

Supportive partnerships have members who bring power/resources to help reach agreed-upon goals. Many community partners are asked to join, and they accept because they believe that they, their organizations, and their contacts can be useful. This is by far the most popular partnership type, one that includes cosmetic as well as substantive reforms. When unforeseen changes or conflicts develop, however, this support may dissolve.

Indifferent partnerships are characterized by members who exhibit low interest and make minimal investments. Typically, such partners are assigned or appointed for political reasons. Frequently, such partners will drop out after a brief period or will play a lackluster protective role. As the process moves along, however, some indifferent partners may become interested enough to become supportive.

Protective partnerships are composed of members whose primary motive is to watchdog the process in order to ensure that their own core interests are protected. Many protective partnerships involve both real and perceived power relationships, thus setting the stage for conflict if real power changes are attempted or even proposed.

Exploitive partnerships may outwardly resemble supportive partnerships, but are actually one-way relationships with hidden agendas. Exploitive behavior refers to the use of power/resources of the group by one partner, without any real intention of sharing decision-making or control on the part of the others. Exploitive behavior also includes public agreement by individuals or groups with partnership goals but private

actions that subvert the goals. Exploitive partnerships may actually become coercive when adversarial "partners" make demands that are considered unacceptable to some partners, but which must be implemented nonetheless. In such cases, one partner decides that it can/must "win," no matter what the cost to the other partners.

Motivation: Three Local Experiences

An analysis of partnerships will be facilitated as we examine the expectations and motivations involved in some operating partnerships. The three examples which follow consider who selects the partners, what they are asked to do, and who can help or hinder the continuation of the partnership.

Partnership A was initiated by a nationally-known professor who developed a plan to change the way teachers are recruited, selected, and prepared in order to deal with a developing teacher shortage in the state's largest urban school district. The professor contacted the superintendent and the teachers' union leader about partnering. Both declined to participate. Without those two partners, the initiative stalled. Within a year, a non-educator superintendent was appointed by a reform-minded board. The professor tried to partner again and this time the offer was accepted with astonishing speed. Within a year, the proposal became operational through a small, tightly focused partnership. In this three-way supportive partnership, trust developed quickly. A fourth partner representing the State's Department of Public Instruction quietly joined the partnership to deal with licensure issues. No community partners were invited; none, it was felt, were needed. Although they have no voice in the partnership, local churches support and help recruit for the program.

Partnership B began with a personal invitation from the superintendent to selected community leaders to participate in a high-level task force to examine the future of vocational education. A well-known business leader chaired the effort and the 28 members included recognized leaders from business and civic groups, state and local governments, union officials, and area colleges and universities. Several principals and a parent representative were also invited. The superintendent's motivation was relatively clear. Stung by the recent defeat of a major bond proposal, he was looking for buy-in from community leaders before trying to raise tax dollars a second time. More than a dozen school district administrators were assigned to provide support for this massive partnership effort, but they were instructed by the superintendent to "let the community do the talking." The motivations of the task force members were as varied as the groups they represented. Some were supportive from the beginning, but many more were primarily protective. Many of the assigned district administrators were indifferent; vocational education did not affect them, or so they thought. Lacking clear direction from the district's educators, the task force gradually organized itself, broadened its mandate, undertook its own research, and produced a set of final recommendations that went far beyond anything they, or the superintendent, foresaw at the beginning of the process.

Partnership C began with the publication of a local think tank report containing data that pointed to a serious and worsening teacher shortage at all levels in the large, urban district. The superintendent and his top-level staff reviewed the data but declined to act. The issue was quietly dropped. A year later, these troubling data were picked up by the union leader and the professor who led Partnership A. They recognized the import of the data and their relationship to what Partnership A had been doing. The two leaders, working with staff from the think tank, agreed to convene a new coalition to draw up a plan of action that would reach far beyond what Partnership A had been able to accomplish in its six years of operation. The leaders recognized from the outset that both the postsecondary system for recruiting and training new teachers and the K–12 system for inducting and retaining these teachers would have to change substantially if the teacher shortage issue was to be successfully addressed. To reach such difficult goals, they would need a strong, lasting, committed partnership that recognized and dealt with the many differing expectations and motivations of the institutions central to such changes.

This new partnership grew slowly. The planning began with a core of experienced and successful teachers selected by the district and the union. In time, other education partners were recruited from the school district's central office, principal and parent organizations, and from area colleges and universities. The absence of trust was palpable; turf protection was the order of the day at early meetings. An experienced facilitator was called in to help smooth the process. Only after months of sometimes rancorous discussions did the overall tone among the educators become more supportive. Finally, a few community members from business and civic groups were invited to sit at the table. At first, their community voices were barely audible. Recognizing the threats contained in the far-ranging proposals, a broad community input process was designed to obtain extensive grass roots reactions to the initial draft. Compromise, even commitment began to grow. The final recommendations from the planning group not only addressed the educational strategies needed to affect changes but also proposed new operational, fiscal, and governing systems to implement and protect such major changes. In operational matters, the community members played major roles. Many had experienced first-hand the wisdom of the warning that "actions that stay within the system—based only on its own resources, personnel, decision making processes and planning, is misconceived, parochial, and likely to fail" (Sarasan 1990). They understood that no one partner could successfully reach the substantive goals agreed upon so they sought ways to ensure that no single partner would be given the power to stop the coalition unless he/she deliberately tried to do so, in open view of all the partners.

Changing in the Partnerships

"Successful collaborations include learning new habits, giving up old ways of doing things and confronting problems that may cause misunderstanding, and resentment" (Corrigan 2000). Agreements at the planning stage are hard enough to accomplish but operations raise even more difficult issues and initial motivations may shift. Many partners are not prepared for such changes, and some will drop out soon after

implementation begins. For example, Partnership A moved the school district and the union into the traditional university sphere of recruiting and preparing teachers. Many of the professor's colleagues reacted negatively as word of his successes spread locally and nationally. Union leaders, however, upon seeing tangible results, became vocal supporters. Partnership B moved the community into curriculum and instruction issues traditionally considered the turf of state officials and school district administrators. Not surprisingly, some school district administrators and state officials moved from the indifferent category to the protective category, as the proposed changes seemed to threaten their turf. As more and more district-controlled obstacles slowed implementation of the full-scale reforms advocated by Partnership B, some community members accused the district of being exploitive, i.e., unwilling to share power and control. In contrast, some school administrators eventually viewed some community members as coercive as demands for change throughout the district escalated. Partnership C raised turf fears among almost everyone by establishing an independent governing mechanism outside the traditional K-12 or university structures. As Partnership C gathered strength and attracted larger numbers of new teachers it was accused of "power grabbing" by education partners (both K–12 and postsecondary) fearful of encroachment into their traditional recruitment, training and induction activities. These criticisms, however, were behind the scenes. No partner publicly challenged the independent structure and by the fifth year the partnership board was expanded to include new education and community members.

Outcomes: Three Local Experiences

Partnership A met most of its partners' expectations by the end of its first year. Now after 12 years, the partnership, its goals, and its program remain relatively unchanged. Several supportive university colleagues have joined the education team. Four successive superintendents have maintained the district's support. Union leaders and school principals laud the program and refer potential new teachers. The program has chosen to operate without fanfare, staying well under the radar of the large education bureaucracies with which it is closely tied. Although it is widely recognized by national alternative certification experts, most local education and community leaders are unaware of its existence. While this low-key strategy has proven to be very effective in allowing the program to operate without interference, it has two major drawbacks. First, the program is unable to expand much beyond the 25 new teachers a year set forth in the original proposal. Yet, the teacher shortage facing the school district now exceeds 1,000 teachers a year and is increasing. Despite its proven success, this small program cannot begin to deal with the overall teacher shortage problem. Second, by staying small, the program has been able to operate without having to demand changes within the institutions upon which it depends for registration, certification, and licensure. This, in turn, results in little or no substantive institutional change. Both the K-12 and university bureaucracies readily make exceptions for this small program that they would likely oppose on a much larger scale. (For additional information, contact the author, Martin Haberman.)

In contrast, Partnership B unveiled its ambitious agenda for change with considerable fanfare, raising expectations at the outset. The task force had moved far beyond the original charge to examine vocational technical education and their comprehensive final report offered recommendations for improving all student learning, all classroom instruction, many teachers' skills, and greatly expanding community involvement. While the report received strong initial support from the superintendent and the school board, and new dollars for the pilot years, a wait-and-see attitude was pervasive among central office administrators and teachers' union officials. Was this effort another flavor-of-the-month reform or would these proposed far-reaching changes actually transpire? Some schools eagerly volunteered to pilot the concepts—ten were selected the first year and another 34 volunteered the second year, but the majority of principals and teachers watched and waited, knowing that the far-reaching reforms would not take full effect district-wide until the fourth year. Given the breadth and scope of the reform model, the partnership effort attracted considerable state and national attention and funding. Particularly noteworthy were the efforts by the business and community partners to spark interest and raise dollars, not only for hundreds of new community partners and a community-based partnership office, but also for a three-year comprehensive external evaluation to ensure that the model was thoroughly understood and tested before the reforms went district-wide.

These positive developments, however, were only part of the story. As full-scale implementation came closer, uncertainty and whispered opposition grew among the large central office staff, as the push for systemic change also required key internal staff changes. Many of the principals and teachers in the schools who were not among the initial pilot groups became increasingly fearful and resistant to the changes they saw taking place elsewhere. Parents voiced concerns about false rumors that their children would be prevented from taking college preparation courses. The high upfront costs of so much change were becoming clear to district administrators and board members. Most ominously, the highly supportive superintendent announced his retirement six months prior to full implementation. Finally, the external evaluation released at the end of the third year, while very positive about the pilot efforts, warned that school district and school board leadership seemed insufficiently prepared for the enormous step of moving from a pilot to a full-district reform effort.

The search for the next superintendent was controversial. He arrived amidst angry accusations and conflicting expectations from the board. Determined to carve his own niche and encouraged by frightened school and central office administrators speaking in defense of the status quo, the new superintendent decided, unilaterally, to discontinue the reform. He informed the community that their assistance was no longer needed. The community, at first stunned then deeply angered, walked away. Within six months the massive change initiative had died. Except for a few determined pilot schools that liked the results they had achieved and vowed to continue on their own, schooling in this large district regressed back to business as usual. (For additional information about this school-to-work initiative contact Eve Hall, former Executive Assistant to the Superintendent, at 414-760-9099 or at ehall@attglobal.net.)

Partnership C benefited from the experiences of partnerships A and B. From the beginning, trust was purposefully nurtured and expectations were carefully restrained so as not to over-promise any one result, thereby avoiding needless fears among affected groups. Initial protective motivations gradually gave way to supportive motivations. The planning took almost a year during which time partnership members gradually developed sufficient commitment to agree that governance of this change effort would be located in an independent organization that operated in cooperation with, but outside of, the direct control of existing bureaucratic and political structures. What had begun as an informal planning collaborative became a non-profit, incorporated governing board. Partnership roles were clearly defined and carefully balanced. New operating systems were designed and then codified in formal agreements with the school district and the union. Funding assistance was sought and eventually received from most partners. The core budget was kept independent of soft money and financed through tuition from the customers, i.e., the future teachers themselves. The new by-laws were adopted at the same time the new educational approaches were approved.

The program was launched by the governing board with considerable trepidation and no fanfare. In its five years of operation, the program has grown from a first year class of 44 new teachers to the current year class of 2002, making it now the largest single supplier of quality teachers for this urban school district. The program began by offering one certification and now offers four types of certifications. Requests for more certifications are received each year. The solid successes of these first years have not gone unnoticed by supporters and detractors alike. Accusations of "power grabbing" surface with the addition of each new teacher certification program. Questions about quality are whispered as the numbers grow. Some promising new directions have been stymied by increasingly threatened traditional programs. So far, however, the commitment of all the original partners has held, enabling the effort to bridge two school superintendents, three university deans, two union presidents, and a transfer of the business leader who served as the first board president. The independence of this partnership has served it well, protecting it to some extent from the "inertia, routine behavior, and conformity" that often characterize bureaucracies. (Sa 1993) (For additional information about the Milwaukee Teacher Education Center contact Tom McGinnity, Executive Director, at 414-227-2505 or mcginnta@mail.milwaukee.k12.wi.us.)

Lessons Learned

1. Leadership does matter. Community members often place a high value on visible leadership as a key ingredient in achieving success. Although community leaders generally respond enthusiastically to charismatic leaders, they are looking for more than official pronouncements. They know that top leaders cannot be effective if they leave implementation to others who may be less committed and/or less competent. Education partners, on the other hand, are sometimes suspicious of charismatic leaders, believing they may not have the in-depth knowledge or the patience needed for real change. Indeed, the business leadership model may not readily lend itself to

partnership leadership. McLaughlin (1998) reminds us that "leadership in an alliance derives, not from an assigned position or role, but rather from a delicate mix of personality, organizational identity, and resources."

In addition, early planning must include preparation for leadership changes. Turnover creates uncertainty, which can produce positive (Partnership A) or negative (Partnership B) results. In large urban districts, frequent leadership changes are the norm and must become a recognized part of major reform planning. Many private and non-profit sector organizations now include succession planning as one of their routine tasks. The public sector needs to build in similar protections for reform efforts in order to maintain sufficient momentum to bridge expected and unexpected leadership changes. In addition, mechanisms are needed to allow partners to enter and leave partnerships as circumstances and interests change.

- 2. Community members tend to look to the education members to set the goals for the partnership. This can be a mixed blessing. If the education partners say that all children can be reading on grade level through the adoption of "x" program, community partners are likely to accept that as a reasonable goal and focus their attention/resources on getting "x" program into every classroom. If "x" program does indeed produce the promised results, all partners will remain supportive. If, however, the goal turns out to be unrealistic or unobtainable, community members tend to blame the educators. Lofty goals may be noble, but short-term accomplishments are essential to keep community partners involved. On the other hand, if the community sets the goals, as happened in Partnership B, the education partners may react dismissively (What do they know?) or defensively (Not in my system!). Either response is likely to trigger behavior typical of almost any complex traditional social organization, namely to accommodate to the plans in ways that require little or no change (Sarasan 1990).
- 3. Partnership members are inherently unequal. One or more of the education partners is usually the target of the change effort (school system or higher education institution), making it inevitable that this partner will want more voice than others. The target partner may invest more personnel, resources and time than the others. It may be more supportive or protective than the others, depending upon its perception of the reform goals. In exploitive cases this partner may find itself the reluctant "victim" of a mandated reform with which it disagrees, e.g. state or federal mandates requiring structural change. As one discerning wag put it: "Partners may be conceived of as contributing to a common breakfast. The chicken who contributes an egg is an involved partner. The pig that contributes the bacon has made a total commitment."
- **4.** Community partners often view the education partners as a single entity. They are unprepared to deal with the age-old ambivalence that marks relationships between schools and universities (Sarasan 1990). They do not know that working together is often as new and as difficult for K-12 and university systems as it is for community members working for the first time with both of them. For example, school and community groups are often organized around problems while universities are organized to advance disciplines. Such organizations do not mesh easily. Too often

higher education members see themselves as the experts. They see their roles as teaching the school and community members rather than serving as "colearners who share the power of knowledge they each hold" (Walsh 2000). Perhaps unwittingly, university partners often come across as a separate, elite culture that wants to change other's systems while keeping their institutions the same (Corrigan 2000). If such antagonisms between education members become unpleasant and continuous, community members are likely to drop out.

- **5.** Changing power relationships inevitably produces winners and losers, both real and perceived. Despite much readily available research on this point, little attention is paid to conflict management at the outset of most partnership efforts. Only as the reform gathers momentum and the conflicts become so apparent that partners can no longer ignore them are divisive issues addressed, often too late to work behind the scenes for acceptable resolutions. This is a crucial juncture for many partnerships and some members will leave rather than pay the price needed to reassure, compensate, or defeat (if they have the power) the now vocal opposition (Partnership B).
- 6. Because of the complexity of urban classrooms, "context" becomes as important as "content" when undertaking major changes in urban school districts. Wherever the partnership originates, major reform proposals will succeed or fail at the individual classroom level. The best in-depth, experiential knowledge of urban classrooms comes from successful teachers and occasionally from parents, two groups that are often overlooked as partnerships are convened to design and oversee improvements in educational results. Since teachers and parents may feel uncomfortable in partnership meetings largely dominated by district, postsecondary, or community members, special arrangements and facilitators are useful to encourage this essential input.
- 7. In education as in the private sector, the "skunkworks" model of piloting new approaches is very effective in allowing new ideas to germinate and develop without having to deal with the usual organizational systems and politics (Partnership A). As in the private sector, however, sooner or later the educational product must leave its protected environment and face the existing system of multiple, often competing, ideas, processes and regulations if it is to become a major force in changing schooling. Such key shifts may take different partners and new structures and are similar to the shifts needed to move a new entrepreneurial business start-up into a larger, on going managed business (Partnership C).
- 8. Community members are likely to expect measurable results within a year or two at most. These are expectations many education members find unreasonable. Community partners, particularly foundations, business, and government partners, often push for immediate and continuing evaluation (both external and internal). They are more likely to understand the importance of feedback loops for continuous improvement. They are also more likely to view evaluation in the broad sense of "developing an organizational culture that makes self-correction a norm and not a war" (Sarasan 1990). Unfortunately, measured results in education often turn out to be

inconclusive or incomplete, leaving community partners uneasy about investing more time or resources in the partnership even if modest results are achieved. Too often, community partners leave the partnership at this crucial point.

Finally, we can learn much from past experiences but partnerships have changed greatly over the last decade. Current partnership goals differ in scope and scale from earlier efforts. In the 1970s, school-focused reforms sought pragmatic not systemic actions. Many operated very informally with little or no structure. Such efforts rarely resulted in "across the board improvements in teaching and learning nor addressed problems within the school or district as a whole..." (Haycock 1994). In the past, many colleges and universities listed a multitude of education partnership projects, but most were cosmetic, dependent on short-term funding, and received little institutional attention or rewards (Brown 1994). By the 1990s, reform advocates recognized that K–12 and higher education efforts had to combine to improve both systems (Haycock 1994). Some higher education members are working to dispel the perception that they are heavy handed professionals who "prescribe and expect their clients and society to accept their prescriptions on faith" (Skrtic and Sailor 1996). Others now work not only as critics and researchers, but also as supporters and implementers along with the other partners.

Previously, the community also focused in large part on cosmetic partnerships. While some of these efforts involved large organizations and hundred of volunteers, the challenges were primarily organizational and positive results were usually immediately apparent. When asked to confront more substantive challenges, the community players too often continue to expect simplistic answers and "quick fixes" to frustratingly complex problems. While some community members find the time and political costs of substantive reform too high, others are seeking new channels for community involvement. "We created a vehicle where successful, committed people from other walks of life could become deeply involved without becoming mired in school politics and bureaucracy. Each Challenge project worked closely with the local districts but usually at arm's length from the superintendents, school boards, and teacher unions. They did this both to avoid entanglement in local politics and to ensure that the Challenge grants did not simply disappear inside the larger school budgets. At times, Challenge projects found themselves at odds with one or more of their partners. Sometimes the tension was healthy. Sometimes it slowed the work" (The Annenberg Challenge 2002).

Increasingly, education and community leaders agree that the growing educational problems cannot be ignored. "For universities to stand aloof from the task of revitalizing our nation's schools and communities, when society has clearly decided that it is an urgent priority, simply will not be tolerated" (Hackney 1994). As new K–12/university models are being developed, more community partners are being invited to join. Indeed, the recently released report on lessons from the first five years by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform notes that "strengthening the hand of civic groups bent on better schools" may be one promising means of improving school performance (Hendrie 2002).

"Changing the system is not for the conceptually and interpersonally fainthearted" (Sarasan 1990). It remains to be seen whether, collectively, there is sufficient courage, persistence, and commitment to reach the goals many now agree are imperative if teaching and learning are to succeed for everyone.

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