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Leadership in School-Community Partnerships

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Abstract

Over the decades, a wide variety of educational reforms have attempted to improve schools and student outcomes. School-community partnerships are among the currently popular reform initiatives. In these initiatives, schools expand the traditional educational mission of the school to include health and social services for children and families and to involve the broader community. Such partnerships have been found to support student learning, strengthen schools and families, and help neighbourhoods flourish. Although the research on these partnerships indicates a variety of models, strategies, and purposes, it is clear about one thing: the vital role of leadership. Through a close review of the literature, we developed a typology of four types of partnerships, ranging from least to most comprehensive in purpose and design: Family and Interagency Collaboration, Full-Service Schools, Full-Service Community Schools, and a Community Development Model. These categories provided the framework necessary to comparatively analyse the role of leadership in each of these models. Our analysis indicates the importance of leadership, across all four models, at all levels of the organization. The more comprehensive the model, the more important “cross-boundary” leadership became.

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Main text

School-community partnerships have captured the attention of policy-makers, educators, and community leaders as a way to strengthen families, schools, and neighbourhoods. The driving assumption behind these partnerships is that expanding the traditional mission of the school to include health and social services for children and families and involving the broader community will benefit individuals and society. Indeed, such partnerships have been found to support student learning, improve schools, and assist families (Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2013). But

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school-community partnerships vary in purpose and design. During our analysis of the literature, we developed four categories of partnerships, ranging from least to most comprehensive, that helped us determine factors that were critical for success. One strong theme across these four types of partnerships was the vital role of leadership. In this paper, we describe the aspects and type of leadership that support the success of each model, analyse the conditions for that success, and examine barriers to that success. Our goals are to contribute to theoretical understandings of these new forms of leaderships and to promote the conditions for successful partnerships.

1. Theoretical Framework

We differentiate models of school-community partnerships through differences in purpose and organizational implications. The *Family and Interagency Collaboration* model is the most basic form of partnership. Its purpose is to better coordinate education, social, and health services for students and families and requires organizational commitment. The *Full-Service School* model aims to do this and more: to coordinate a comprehensive array of services and, as much as possible, offer them at the school site. *Full-Service Community Schools* continue this model, but add a critical element: family and community input. This is a democratic model, where families and community members are viewed as partners, not simply recipients of services. As such, *Full-Service Community Schools* require both organizational and cultural change. The *Community Development Model* is the most comprehensive of the four, aiming not only to assist students and families, but to transform whole neighbourhoods. The breadth of this goal requires inter-organizational and cultural change.

The general theory of action behind these partnership models is that students' educational prospects will improve if family and community members are more involved in the life of the school and if the school can attend to an array of student and family needs. This reform approach generally involves partnering with community and social service organizations and is supported by both developmental and sociological research. Main developmental theorists, such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Comer (Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996), emphasize the multiple and inter-related dimensions of human development. They also argue for an ecological perspective: examining the environmental contexts that support or impede healthy development and learning. This orientation intersects with sociological perspectives that point to the persistent impact of social and cultural capital on student achievement (Bourdieu, 1986) and argue that good health, family and community support, and employment prospects are key factors in students' academic success (Jencks, 1992; Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 1999). Both perspectives lead to the conclusion that schools should not be organized to function as separate institutions, isolated from the community context, which is currently the norm in U.S. public schools, especially those situated in high-poverty neighbourhoods.

This theory of action, however, tells us little about the leadership required to make such partnerships work. The school leadership literature emphasizes the importance of school leaders establishing trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), negotiating consensus and managing crises (Achinstein, 2002), cultivating shared commitments (Newmann et al., 2000), promoting shared decision-making (Marks & Louis, 1999; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), and being the driver for organizational change (Bryk et al., 2010). We also know that school leaders with these capacities are relatively rare and often hard to keep (Bryk et al., 2010). But partnering with different types of agencies and across organizations, and expanding the mission of the school while protecting the core teaching and learning mission of the school requires a whole new set of skills. While we have descriptions and nascent theories to draw on, we do not yet have a comprehensive picture of these requirements. Through our review of the literature, we begin the process of compiling this picture.

2. Methodology

We initially identified studies related to school-community partnerships by searching through ERIC and EBSCO, using descriptors such as *school-community partnerships*, *full-service schools*, *community school*, *wrap around services*, and *community-school linked services*. We then conducted ancestral searches using the articles initially identified for inclusion. Additionally, when articles appeared in themed journal issues, we searched through those in order to identify other sources of information. We used a similar process when particular journals consistently appeared in our search, scanning through several issues manually searching for relevant keywords. A total of 43 articles were identified through these searches. Finally, we contacted several community school agencies to identify relevant studies and documents that had been published for the organization and therefore might not

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