On to the Cases

This overview has shared the promise and challenges experienced by two communities and one school district attempting to engage an entire community in school improvement. Building on lessons learned from this research and prior Partnership work, we developed the enclosed “Guide to Creating School-Community Partnerships That Make a Difference” to guide other communities interested in launching similar efforts. The specific cases provide more details on this kind of work looks like on the ground, and the Gold Standard for School/Community Partnerships (available online by clicking on Partnership at NewCities at www.newcities.org) provides an image of what a successful partnership might look like. In reviewing the cases, readers should consider the extent to which each one effectively addresses the key questions posed earlier in this report, how they compare to the Gold Standard and where the challenges remain. Readers also should consider how they might replicate or adapt these efforts in their own communities.

Prospects for the Future

The work of engaging an entire community in school improvement is challenging and difficult, but the potential benefits to a community are quite high. A first step for communities is to develop a clear strategy that addresses the key components as outlined in this overview and the accompanying Guide and to anticipate and address the challenges identified here. A business leader in Northern Kentucky spoke of the importance of making education improvement a company-wide effort.

If the whole community doesn’t get behind Vision 2015, it will not be successful. [The idea is that] everyone on the direct connection to education is important and why they need to support it. We are way far away from that happening, but that is where we are going.

More Information

To learn more about this work, contact: [Patricia J. Kannapel, pka@bellevue.ky.us]
[Stephen K. Clements, skclements@skandstream.net]

The Effective School-Community Engagement Project was made possible with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Research was conducted by [Patricia J. Kannapel and Stephen K. Clements] with support from Carolyn Witt Jones and Polly Link-Pugh of the Partnership at NewCities. The project reports were edited by [Daniel J. Taylor].

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Challenges

The cases included in this report provide models for other communities that wish to engage all stakeholders in ensuring that students graduate from high school well-prepared. However, as noted earlier, the work is still relatively new in both locations, and many challenges remain. This work offers guidance on launching a community engagement effort, but communities themselves will need to be prepared to address the challenges that will inevitably arise. We list some of these challenges below:

- **Funding the Work:** The cases describe examples of prior efforts that were not sustained due to a lack of funding. It is likely that finding a secure funding source will continue as a challenge when multiple organizations attempt to create partnerships such as these. It is important to identify and secure that funding instead of taking for granted that the work will continue on the basis of whatever time and resources each partner is willing to commit.

- **Lack of resource in rural communities:** A national survey reported that rural schools had below-average levels of community-based partnerships. This is likely due to having fewer businesses, resources and employment opportunities to give shape to the work. In these cases, a regional effort may be more appropriate.

- **Promoting out-of-the-box thinking:** Creating school-community partnerships focused on improved student learning and preparation will require out-of-the-box thinking. The efforts described in the cases tend to be dominated by educators, with a much smaller business and community presence. It may be necessary to widen business and community participation to nudge educators out of their comfort zones and into more substantive and productive partnerships with the community.

- **Persevering and maintaining momentum:** The dedication of those involved and the availability of resources. The challenge is to sustain forward momentum. All participants must realize that creating these sorts of partnerships, developing activities and then seeing those activities through years takes years of sustained activity.

- **Creating school-community partnerships:** Two Owensboro and Northern Kentucky have been working on school-community partnerships for at least two decades. These efforts have ebbed and flowed, depending on the dedication of those involved and the availability of resources. The challenge is to sustain forward momentum. All participants must realize that creating these sorts of partnerships, developing activities and then seeing those activities through years takes years of sustained activity.

- **Making a Meaningful Difference:** “Guide to Creating School-Community Partnerships That Make a Difference” to guide other communities interested in launching similar efforts. The specific cases provide more details on this kind of work looks like on the ground, and the Gold Standard for School/Community Partnerships (available online by clicking on Partnership at NewCities at www.newcities.org) provides an image of what a successful partnership might look like. In reviewing the cases, readers should consider the extent to which each one effectively addresses the key questions posed earlier in this report, how they compare to the Gold Standard and where the challenges remain. Readers also should consider how they might replicate or adapt these efforts in their own communities.

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In the three cases profiled, school-community partnerships focus on improving student preparation. Making student success the goal secured the commitment of partner organizations because everyone wanted to address it. In Owensboro, Alliance members said that the desire to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The cases reveal that the work around school-community engagement is often spearheaded by just such a group of dedicated citizens. It helped that these individuals had some clout in the community.

In Owensboro, two leaders of the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation—each of whom enjoyed a local, regional and statewide reputation—made it their business to revitalize the work of the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation. In Northern Kentucky, several staff and members of the Chamber of Commerce have long served as catalysts for community engagement in schools. In recent years, they have been joined by committed individuals from Northern Kentucky Regional Planning Commission, NewCivs, Toyota Motor Engineering & Manufacturing North America, Inc., the Northern Kentucky Council of Partners (the local P-16 council) and several area businesses and school districts. They have also been instrumental in helping to steer local and statewide initiatives, such as the Kenton County school district, and the Owensboro School Public Schools, a business liaison with a marketing background to secure business and community resources to support school district initiatives.

Who should be involved?

Key organizations: It is important to include organizations whose participation is critical to the success of the school-community partnership. Both the Owensboro and Northern Kentucky metropolitan areas encompass several school districts and postsecondary institutions, all of which have been invited to participate. In addition, the initiatives in these communities included representatives of local employers, chambers of commerce, the Kentucky Department of Education, the Kenton County Public Schools, Manufacturing North America, Inc., and the Owensboro Medical Health System. In each partnership, the diversity of the membership is based on the rationale that local employers have a stake in ensuring that students are prepared for work.

The local statistic to identify a specific focus: Both communities developed a collaborative spirit by reviewing local statistics to identify problems that everyone wanted to address. Owensboro focused its efforts around data showing that the Kenton County school district’s marketing plan for the Schools of Study program (www.kenton.k12.ky.us/sos/default.htm), the Kenton County Council’s knowledge of the local labor market and the fact that the Owensboro Medical Health System is one of the region’s largest employers. These statistics united the partners behind Alliance activities. Said one Alliance member, “If people don’t keep it focused and keep the priorities straight, it could become a mish-mash.” In Northern Kentucky, the Vision 2015 team examined and shared with the public the data showing that the region’s economy and population have been expanding rapidly. Vision 2015 anticipates the creation of 50,000 new jobs by 2015, which, along with the community around an effort to ensure that there are enough skilled laborers local work to meet that need. A vision team leader noted at the Champions for Education Summit: “This is all about positioning our region to compete. We are in a battle for our future and educational excellence stands at the heart of what we want to achieve. We have a goal of 50,000 new jobs, and many require a high school degree. We have to succeed in preschool, K-12, college and adult education to produce the desired workforce for businesses, or we will never succeed.”

What is required of participants?

Work within the structure of the group: In both communities, structures were created that enabled participants to contribute regularly and in substantive ways. In Owensboro, committees of partner representatives lead the work. In Northern Kentucky, the Vision 2015 team examined the data and decisions, and set timelines to ensure the work moves forward.

How will we remain up to date on the progress and challenges of the work? Such reports will ensure that these stakeholders remain up to date on the progress and challenges of the work. Continuity is important to ensure success. In Northern Kentucky, a loss of funding resulted in some of the Chamber’s earliest initiatives becoming dormant. In Owensboro, district initiatives have been provided with local and state support to launch the effort and keep it going. In Owensboro, partner groups and Owensboro Medical Health System (www.kenton.k12.ky.us/sos/default.htm). By 2015, Vision 2015 team examined and shared with the public the data showing that the region’s economy and population have been expanding rapidly. Vision 2015 anticipates the creation of 50,000 new jobs by 2015, which, along with the community around an effort to ensure that there are enough skilled laborers local work to meet that need. A vision team leader noted at the Champions for Education Summit: “This is all about positioning our region to compete. We are in a battle for our future and educational excellence stands at the heart of what we want to achieve. We have a goal of 50,000 new jobs, and many require a high school degree. We have to succeed in preschool, K-12, college and adult education to produce the desired workforce for businesses, or we will never succeed.”

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