

Joining Forces: Building Collaborative Learning Communities through Family-School-University-Community Partnerships

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Abstract

Two College of Education faculty members describe their journeys as “professors in residence” immersed in schoolwide change efforts at two different partnership schools. Collaboration with school staff, students’ families, and community agencies led to the formation of significant alliances that contributed to the process of school improvement and change. Implications for collaboration among stakeholders, engaged scholarship, and lessons learned are discussed.

Introduction

A professional development school is a reciprocal and beneficial partnership in which university faculty and their students collaborate with public school educators and their students to connect theory and practice. In this context, educators at all levels can share ideas and bring fresh perspectives and school reform efforts into classrooms (*Clark and Horton-Parker 2002*). Such work also includes collaborative efforts with families and communities as essential stakeholders in the education of our young people. In the past few years professional development schools have been gaining momentum as a means for universities to forge partnerships with public schools and for communities to create better schools (*Clark 1999*). With an increased emphasis on academic achievement and mandated high-stakes testing in our country, there has been pressure for public schools to show improvement in outcomes. Grades, achievement test scores, and school completion are examples of measures for which school districts are held accountable. Additionally, there has been an emphasis on citizenship and family involvement, and character education has been mandated in some states. School safety and violence prevention efforts have also been in the spotlight as a priority in the United States. School systems at local and state levels have been asking for help, claiming that there are larger, societal issues affecting teaching and learning for which they are being held responsible.

An increase in student diversity within many individual schools, as well as from one geographic area to another, makes it clear that we need to prepare educators to work in a variety of settings with an emphasis on culturally responsive teaching, counseling, service, and research. Professional development schools can create contexts for structural, organizational, and cultural changes that support improved approaches to teaching, learning, and school leadership (Teitel 2001).

Historically, educators in public schools have had distinct and separate roles, although many have acknowledged that there is overlap among the “separate spheres” that exist (Schlechty 1997;

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Senge 2000). For example, many educators recognize that they may operate simultaneously as a teacher, administrator, counselor, disciplinarian, and parental figure, although their expertise may be in one specific area. Further, through educational reform initiatives it has become clearer that a variety of partnerships can enhance and contribute to school, family, and community collaborative efforts (Amatea and Vandiver 2004).

Alliances among schools, universities, community agencies, and businesses can make the whole stronger than the sum of its parts with regard to the education of our young people (Clark, Shreve, and Stone 2004).

Many visionary educators are recognizing that the organizational arrangement of “separate spheres” limits the resources available for educating today’s students (Behar-Horenstein and Amatea 1996; Schlechty 1997; Senge 2000). To maximize these resources, administrators are reorganizing their staffs to create “learning communities” (Senge 2000) or “collaborative communities” (Schlechty 1997) where organizational goals and roles are shared.

Both university-level educators and school administrators have seen benefits in forming alliances around school organization involving university “faculty in residence” in the school setting, whereby a university faculty member may spend extended time in a school, becoming immersed in the school environment and collaborating with school staff to facilitate teaching and learning.

Such engaged scholarship (*Boyer 1996*) redefines the way university faculty may build connections between theory and practice, and blur the boundaries among research, teaching, and service agendas.

Tasked with the responsibility of preparing more effective school counselors, we, two university counselor educators, were interested in exploring how school counselors might build stronger working partnerships with teachers, families, and communities, for what purposes, and what might result from them. Our specific questions were: (1) In what areas of school life might a school counselor optimally contribute? (2) How might counselors partner with teachers, administrators, and community agencies to engage in schoolwide change efforts? (3) What types of shared goals and activities can be developed to include family involvement? (4) What positive changes can result from such partnering efforts?

In this article, we describe our experience and lessons learned in partnering for schoolwide change in two different school-university collaborative programs. The common focus was to build counselor-teacher-administrative partnerships to enhance students' academic functioning and social-emotional development.

Building Partnerships

Several years ago, we were approached by two public schools within our geographic region to become actively involved with schoolwide change. The two schools and their surrounding local communities varied one from another, as did their needed changes. As counselor educators we both embrace the concept of counselors as educational leaders and effective change agents in schools. We view our involvement as an ideal way to include our graduate students in learning to be team players with other school staff to effect positive and culturally relevant changes in schools. Such involvement at the preservice level helps graduate students shape their roles as future professional educators. We strongly believe in working in collaboration with teachers in classrooms to promote academic achievement and social-emotional well-being as well as modeling that collaboration for our preservice educators. It is our philosophy that forging connections among schools, universities, families, and the community can strengthen all of the entities involved in collaborative efforts.

Administrators and counselors tend to have a more holistic view of the school and its organization, whereas teachers tend to focus on their classrooms and individual students. Since teachers

spend their time in direct contact with students, they will often be the first to notice academic and social/emotional concerns that can affect student performance and efficacy. It is essential that counselors and teachers establish and maintain collaborative relationships with each other to help students be the best they can be in their educational achievement as well as in their citizenship and character development. Additionally, establishing relationships with students' families and with community agencies and businesses can enhance our work. As "brokers of resources," counselors and teachers can establish connections with important partners outside the school who can contribute to educational goals.

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Using data in program planning: In a study that we conducted on teacher perceptions and expectations of school counselor contributions (see Clark and Amatea 2004), we found that teachers' most frequently held expectation about the counselor's role was that of counselor-teacher communication, collaboration, and teamwork. Teachers reported that strong working relationships among teachers, counselors, and administrators were essential to an effective school. As a result, teachers expected that counselors would work closely with them both in providing instructional support and in resolving individual student problems. Hence the teachers in this study expressed a desire for counselors to work with them in developing and delivering classroom lessons on topics such as problem solving and decision making, dealing with aggression, acceptance of differences, and character education, as well as helping establish a positive learning environment. In addition, teachers expected counselors to provide specific information to large groups of students relating to educational planning. They expressed the need for counselors to work with small groups of students to enhance their skills in developing social relationships, mediating conflicts, and addressing peer and family issues that may affect academic performance. The results of this study helped provide a framework for our partnership work described in this article.

Description of Our Schools: Building Collaborative School Communities

Our school-university community in North Central Florida is demographically diverse. A large county geographically, it is home to the state's flagship university as well as a community college. In addition to education, health, and social services jobs, employment includes retail trade, arts, recreation, food services, manufacturing, construction, finance, agriculture, and public administration. Part of the county is rural with regard to housing and livelihood. Racial makeup of the county is as follows: 73.5 percent White; 19.3 percent Black or African American; 5.7 percent Hispanic or Latino; 3.5 percent Asian; 1.4 percent other. (Some people report more than one race, resulting in a total of more than 100%.) The percentage of children under the age of 18 living in poverty is similar to the national figure, approximately 19 percent.

Partnering with a high-poverty elementary school: One of our partnership schools was a small, high-poverty, predominantly African American public school of about 250 students, pre-K through fifth grade. Ninety-three percent of the students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

Our department in the College of Education was consulted about placing a “professor in residence” at the school for a day each week to work with the staff in a number of areas, including discipline, social-emotional learning, academic achievement, and overall classroom and school climate issues. Additionally, we worked with a learning center within the College that funded a teacher fellows program to offer professional development to educators at the school. We created partnerships with a number of community agencies that offered support for mentoring and tutoring students. We also were instrumental in implementing a career day, creating additional business partnerships, and initiating a counselor education partnership that included our internship students. These and similar activities helped establish connections with students and their families that promoted academic achievement and offered encouragement.

Our counselor education team consisted of the professor in residence, the school counselor, and four practicum and internship graduate students in school counseling who worked together to set goals and plan interventions for the school and students. Informal

written and verbal needs assessments were used to communicate with teachers concerning their specific classroom and student issues. One main theme that emerged was teachers' desire to

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improve classroom climate by having students treat each other as members of a cohesive and collaborative family. They wanted to teach children to show caring and respect for each other and to accept and value differences. Our team designed a “CARE” unit that we implemented for fourth-grade classrooms (see Clark 2004). This unit consisted of a set of activities designed to build a sense of community in working toward common goals in the classroom by helping students learn effective communication, exploring the

impact that students' attitudes have on each other, demonstrating how to show respect, and emphasizing the importance of encouraging one another.

In addition to classroom counseling activities, all students in the school were involved in small groups of four to eight students for a series of counseling sessions. These groups addressed topics such as school success skills, family changes, communication and friendship, and embracing diversity. Individual counseling was offered to those who needed additional support. In addition, we expanded the school's outreach efforts to students' families. Our counseling team also worked with community agencies and business partnerships to plan a schoolwide career day, mentoring and tutoring programs, and curricular enhancements such as a garden program in which each class had a plot that they planted and tended throughout the year. Cross-curricular lessons were designed and taught, and students took pride in their group contributions.

Data from a survey administered to the school staff at the end of the school year showed that the efforts we had made to achieve various objectives at the school had been rated highly and showed strong support for all elements of the partnership that had been established.¹ Student evaluations of small and large group activities were very positive, with comments such as, “Our class feels

closer to one another now, and we are appreciating differences that we have.” Another student wrote, “I loved doing the Random Acts of Kindness activity and our class is still doing it. We add examples to the poster we started with you in class.” Yet another stated, “The Career Day was so much fun! It was even better than ‘Good Behavior Boogey’!” [an ongoing school activity that had been in place as a reinforcer for appropriate behavior]. Additionally, the statewide school grade based on high-stakes achievement testing went up two letter grades, from D to B. Although no one person or program could take complete credit for the rise in school test scores, there was consensus that a team effort had contributed to the positive changes at the school.

Partnering with a Developmental Research School: The other partnership school with whom we worked was the K-12 developmental research school connected with our university. Within walking distance of our campus, this school of 1200 students has a diverse demographic profile (57% white, 29% black, 12% Hispanic, and 2% Asian). Student attendance was about 95 percent. Approximately 25 percent of the student body received free or reduced-price meals. Students apply to attend the school and are selected on a lottery basis to reflect the demographic make-up of the local community. The organizational structure of the school consisted of three units, each having an assigned counselor: an elementary (K-5) school unit staffed by 14 classroom teachers, a middle school unit (6-8) composed of 12 core academic teachers, and a secondary school (9-12) unit employing 24 teachers.

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The director of the school requested a “professor in residence” from our Counselor Education Department to work with the staff to create stronger working connections between counselors, teachers, and students’ families. Because the director was committed to creating a strong school leadership team in which the school counselor plays an integral role, her invitation for assistance focused on bringing about an organizational change in

how school counselors worked with teachers and how the school staff delivered services to students and their families. These organizational changes were implemented chiefly through (1) consultation with the school's counselors and teachers in the development and delivery of specific family-school intervention activities, and (2) provision of clinical and research supervision to doctoral and master's level graduate students assigned to the school.

The primary goal of our change project was to foster in our school staff a mindset of partnership and collaboration with each other and with students' families to enhance student learning. We defined "family-school collaboration" as a cooperative process of planning and problem solving involving school staff, parents, children, and significant others that would be used to maximize resources for students' academic achievement and social-emotional development (*Amatea 1999*).

We organized our project activities into six phases: (1) assessing initial attitudes and practices of the school staff, (2) setting goals, (3) organizing our staff into instructional teams and scheduling joint planning time, (4) introducing a new meeting format for family-school problem solving, (5) implementing a student-led parent conference format to increase positive nonproblematic family-school contacts, and (6) collecting feedback about these changes from our students, parents, and teachers (*Amatea et al. 2004*).

How could counselors help the teaching staff change their mindset of operating separately from families and from each other? To accomplish the goal of fostering a climate of partnership and collaboration among the school staff and students' families, we delineated a number of objectives for changing current counselor-teacher-family relationships. First, we believed that *counselors could help their teaching colleagues to purposefully block the blaming that undermines many family-school problem-solving routines and engage in joint problem solving with students and their parents*. In addition, we believed that counselors could help their teaching colleagues devise opportunities to engage with students' families in interaction driven more by a desire to build positive alliances than by the need to resolve problems. To accomplish this, counselors needed to have time with teachers structured into the school day to model a collaborative role with teaching staff and to show teachers how to elicit and constructively use student and parent input in solving student problems and in making educational plans. Hence, with the cooperation of the administration, counselors were assigned to all the

grade-level teaching teams and met with them on a regular basis to solve problems and develop school activities.

Second, *parents and students needed to have active, influential roles in participating in no-fault family-school problem solving.* Both parent and student needed to have active, influential roles, not as an audience but as full participants in family-school problem solving. We looked to the example of the staff of the Family-School Collaboration Project at the Ackerman Institute

(Weiss and Edwards 1992; Weiss 1996), which brought about a redesign of family-school problem-solving meetings to underscore the role of parents and students as co-decision-makers and thus illustrate the belief that everyone—parents, teachers, and students—had a job to do to ensure students' educational success. Counselors showed teachers how to (1) focus on identifying a problem, (2) determine who might be available to help solve the problem, (3) search together for

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solutions rather than attempt to determine who caused the problem and why, and (4) develop action plans together with all the stakeholders. By serving as a member of each grade-level teaching team, the counselor had an opportunity to coach the teachers in instituting this new problem-solving practice.

A third objective was to *build collaborative relationships with all parents whether the parents could come to school or not.* To do this, the school needed to make clear to parents how their active participation in their children's educational experience could directly enhance their children's achievement and development. In addition, the school needed to look for ways to communicate a genuine interest in connecting with the parents of all of their students to ensure these outcomes. Efforts were made to communicate with parents about upcoming school events, such as student-led parent conferences. However, if some parents were not able to come to the school because of work or family demands, the school staff signaled their belief that these parents still cared deeply about their children's learning by providing

them with the means to understand and keep up with what was happening in school. Methods included offering the opportunity to learn from their child about the child's progress, use of summary letters describing an event they missed, regular newsletters, and homework assignments.

Finally, we believed that *we should increase opportunities for nonproblematic family-school interactions and that all these activities should be planned to maximize student learning.* Rather

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than simply trying to “get parents involved,” we wanted our school staff to use the family-school relationship to meet specific educational goals, solve problems, and celebrate the children and their achievements. Consequently, our school staff looked for opportunities for parents, students, and school staff to interact with one another by emphasizing family involvement in children's planning, decision making, problem solving, and learn-

ing. We decided to embed a collaborative focus into a variety of different school events: orientations, classroom instruction, homework routines, celebrations, presentations of new curriculum, transitions to new grade levels and programs, procedures for home-school communication and for resolving difficulties. We believed that such collaborative interactions could transform the ways families and school staff members experienced each other.

In addition, we developed a format for family-school problem-solving meetings that structured an active, coexpert role for students as well as for parents. This new format featured task focus, blocking of blame, and involvement of all family members as persons who could contribute to resolving the child's problems. Our message was that the student/child could be helped only when everyone, including the student, works together. The idea of including the child in an active, problem-solving role in such a meeting along with his/her parents and teachers was adopted as a new format with students and their families at the school. This positive approach, which encouraged the student to share responsibility for his/her

educational progress, has been added to the school's repertoire of strategies to engage families and include students, and has been perceived as being highly beneficial.

Discussion: Lessons Learned

We learned a number of important lessons from our school-wide change partnership efforts. These lessons ranged from reinforcement of our thinking about the nature of schools to practical aspects of implementing ways for universities to function as change agents working with school-level educators to build connections among students, families, and community members to enhance student learning. Expanding our horizons opened our eyes to a much larger picture of the school and its community, one in which we saw schoolwide group needs and strengths as well as individual ones.

Our partnerships with schools helped reinforce our conceptualization of schools as systems in which there are many important stakeholders. As onsite participants, we were able to view various levels of specific school issues and the variety of influences that surround each; that is, we were able to examine the continuum of change from the micro or individual level, such as an individual student or teacher, to the macro or institutional level, such as the classroom, school, or district. Teaming with teachers to assist them in working in new ways in their classrooms, with families, and as a whole school seemed to be an effective way of promoting positive and collaborative school and community relationships.

Partnerships can be developed at a variety of levels within a system. Examples include the faculty within a school, alliances between universities and specific schools or districts, school/university/business partnerships, and between schools and families.

We have found that collaboration is an egalitarian approach, and that school and system change will come about more readily when each stakeholder makes a contribution and feels "heard." Change comes optimally from mutually shared goals rather than from a mandate. It is important to build motivation for change and to help reinforce it. Open and positive communication can forge relationships among the stakeholders that will contribute to commitment for shared work.

Change can take much time and patience. It does not happen overnight. Lasting change may be "one step at a time." Having patience and being able to see the bigger picture is very important.

Nurturing and encouraging are as necessary to the change process as are perceptions of the participants. Being able to show tangible gains is also strategic in establishing a rationale for a program and seeking additional support through existing or new partnerships. For example, being able to demonstrate improved academic performance or lower dropout rates can help create support for programs that were designed to contribute to those positive changes.

Conclusion

As university-level educators, we discovered the value and mutual benefits of building school-university-community alliances by immersing ourselves in school culture. We also realized the significance of learning how to develop and lead ongoing change efforts with our university-level preservice counselors, teachers, and administrators so that they will embrace such responsibilities as they become professional educators. We can approach these goals in a number of ways. Counselor and teacher educators can teach and model collaboration and interdisciplinary cooperation through coursework, projects, and individual and group supervision with their students as well as work with other stakeholders outside their departments. Planning seminars with preservice counselors, teachers, administrators, and school psychologists, for example, would offer each group an opportunity to share their perspectives as well as their growing areas of expertise. Preservice educators can work together during their training, setting the stage for collaborative relationships in their future professional work. Teaching and practicing systems theory is another way to help preservice educators view the school and its various components as part of a larger system; one which they can influence in a variety of ways, including collaboration, leadership, and advocacy for students.

Our partnerships with two schools with different needs within the same community have allowed us to look through a wider lens at school-level educators' roles and at our own efforts as university faculty members to assess how effectively we prepare preservice educators with the skills and attitudes needed to work in partnerships within the school and in the larger community. Although our two schools had differing populations and specific needs, we recognized the significance of both modeling and training our graduate students in the implementation of culturally responsive interventions that include a degree of flexibility and

can be developed to fit the needs of diverse populations. Our experiences continue to shape our research, service, and teaching agendas so that the boundaries among those arenas are permeable rather than separate. In furthering these agendas, we immerse ourselves in the very real worlds of schools, families, and communities with the goal of making a positive difference.

Endnote

1. Unpublished University of Florida College of Education report, 2003.

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