

Wepner, S.B., & Hopkins, D. (Eds.). (2011). *Collaborative Leadership in Action: Partnering for Success in Schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Review by Kai A. Schafft

Collaborative Leadership in Action: Partnering for Success in Schools, edited by Shelley B. Wepner and Dee Hopkins, takes on the important issue of collaboration and collaborative leadership as a means of providing for the successful education of students and the effective organization and strategic management of pre-K-12 educational institutions. Although much of the volume focuses on collaborative partnerships between pre-K-12 schools and colleges and universities, significant attention is also devoted to school-community partnerships of various types, with numerous examples and mini-case studies, coupled with extensive discussion regarding the traits and skills necessary for effective collaborative leadership.

Educators, particularly those in pre-K-12 educational settings, are faced with difficult dilemmas regarding leadership, inter-institutional collaboration, and partnership. On the one hand, schools as social institutions central to the communities they serve, play not only important educational roles, but also vital symbolic, cultural, civic, and economic roles. Because of this, the well-being of schools and the communities in which they are located typically are closely linked. Healthy communities tend to produce healthy schools, and well-functioning schools represent important community assets. Therefore, local schools and the educational leaders serving within them would seem to be placed in especially advantageous positions to utilize the school-community connection in the efforts to improve education while simultaneously strengthening community. Similarly, university faculty interested in community development and public education may be well-positioned to leverage the resources and capacity of higher education institutions to address a multitude of school and community issues.

A number of factors, however, increasingly militate against collaborative leadership at the pre-K-12 level in times of shrinking public education funding and a strong emphasis on high-stakes testing that has effectually narrowed the scope of what many educators and administrators understand as being within the acceptable purview of their leadership. That is, if priorities increasingly need to be shifted toward standardized testing outcomes in

the context of rapidly diminishing fiscal and institutional resources, collaborative leadership and community development may appear increasingly less relevant to the essential role of schooling. Similarly, many higher education faculty members, especially those not associated with professional development and teacher-training programs, are likely to see more institutional disincentives than rewards for collaborative activity with local schools. Even in land-grant universities and other higher education institutions with articulated outreach missions, these collaborative efforts are often unlikely to be viewed by faculty members as consistent with high-priority academic activity: entrepreneurial efforts to secure competitive external funding and to produce scholarship that can be published in flagship disciplinary journals.

There is no question that these are real constraints that hinder collaborative leadership, and the building of partnering relationships between pre-K-12 institutions and higher education institutions as well as other entities such as business, human services, and the nonprofit sector. This is why books such as *Collaborative Leadership* are valuable, especially at a time when “go it your own” approaches are increasingly untenable as a means of strategic school and community development. Potential collaborators, across educational institutions of various types, can benefit not only from clear examples of successful education partnerships, but also from careful discussions of why these institutional collaborations may make sense.

Wepner and Hopkins organize their book into three main sections, each divided into individual chapters. The first section, consisting of two chapters, provides an overview of both the value of establishing partnerships and the approaches to, and ways of, understanding different types of partnerships. These chapters strike a balance between providing practical information for practitioners and grounding information in theory and research-based knowledge. The second section contains three chapters focused on the logistics of creating and sustaining partnerships, and how those partnerships may be assessed through formative evaluation procedures. The chapters pay attention to the different types of partnerships and the relationship to data and assessment.

The last section, again consisting of three chapters (two authored by Wepner) explores, in greater depth, the nature of collaborative leadership itself. Some of the discussion in this last section dwells too much on often somewhat abstracted and idealized characteristics of effective collaborative leaders and collaborative leadership “best practices.” I would have

appreciated seeing more attention paid to how those broader traits and skills might be applied to particular partnership contexts given that “collaborative leaders are as varied as the partnerships they serve” (p. 181). What are the implications, for example, for collaborations, partnerships, and collaborative leadership approaches in economically disadvantaged urban settings versus remote rural settings? In view of the emphasis on pre-K-12 and higher education partnerships, the lack of attention to partnerships within rural contexts in particular seems a missed opportunity, given the relative lack of access many rural schools and communities have to higher education institutions as well as the ambivalent attitude of many rural areas toward higher education when it represents a perceived source of rural “brain drain,” and the ultimate outmigration of a community’s “best and brightest.”

That said, these chapters contain a wealth of practical information, strategies, and guidance related to the logistics of establishing and cultivating contacts and relationships across institutional boundaries, and how to effectively communicate the logic and benefits of collaboration to various institutional actors. The book overall also benefits from the inclusion of multiple examples grounded in the various specificities of local context, offering hints as to how collaborative leaders may in fact vary their leadership strategies, approaches, and goals depending on the needs, resources, opportunities, and constraints confronting them.

I recommend this volume as an important resource for educators, collaborative leaders, and a range of institutional and community stakeholders interested in the benefits of a variety of collaborative partnerships for school and community improvement and tangible strategies for enacting and sustaining effective partnerships. Although pitched primarily toward practitioners, it also is well-grounded in theory and empirical research, a balance sure to be appreciated by collaborative leaders and would-be collaborative leaders from multiple institutional and educational settings.

About the Reviewer

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