

IDENTIFYING HIGH QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

Community Connections and Collaborations

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Overview

The purpose of this fact sheet is to introduce key principles to building effective community collaborations in order to increase the quantity and quality of youth programs. Youth, parents, and community members will be introduced to strategies for establishing key community collaborations that will promote the positive development of all young people through the establishment of high-quality youth programs.

Introduction

Community collaborations provide young people with access to a full range of developmentally appropriate youth programs (Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001). These programs provide the support and opportunities necessary for youth to be able to fulfill their goals (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2001). In a recent nationwide poll, 94% of American voters agreed that there should be organized after-school programming for youth to attend daily (Afterschool Alliance/Mott Foundation, 2004). A key element of a high-quality youth program is effective collaboration between community-based organizations, youth, families, other adults, and schools (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, 1998).

Effective Collaboration is Key to High-Quality Youth Programming

Schools and community-based youth development organizations have different missions but equivalent goals (Friedman & Bleiberg, 2002). "Community-based programs that are connected to the schools, not isolated from them, are more likely to assist families and increase student learning and success" (Epstein, 2001, pg. 164). Collaboration helps organizations achieve goals that could not be achieved separately by capitalizing on each organization's assets, resources, and perspectives (Ashcraft, 2002). High-quality, equitable youth programs that are accessible to more youth are enhanced when the resources of community-based organizations are utilized in addition to the resources of the school system and other organizations (Pittman, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Ferber, 2003).

Collaborations facilitate the creation of continuous comprehensive youth programming for youth of all ages,

including a range of underserved and at-risk populations with special needs. Combining the efforts of youth, families, schools, and other organizations results in programs that focus on the whole person (Adger, 2001). Indirectly, collaborations can provide the means for youth to achieve academically through the development of competencies in academic, social, emotional, vocational, civic, and physical domains (Honig, et al., 2001). Collaborative efforts utilize the strengths of all the collaborators and develop strategies to achieve the goals of positive youth development (McLaughlin, 2000).

Developing Effective Collaborations

Establishing and sustaining collaborative efforts with and on behalf of young people requires communities to mobilize. The first step is creating the conditions that encourage all stakeholders (e.g., youth organizations, schools, families, youth, and others) to work together. Four conditions that mobilize efforts to collaborate are:

- Awareness that things need to change
- Knowledge of strategies needed to facilitate these changes
- Engagement of the entire community to implement the changes
- Commitment of all participants to make the necessary changes

A second step in establishing effective collaboration to support and establish opportunities for youth requires the implementation of community strategies. These strategies include: strengthening the capacity of community adults

8 Features of Positive Youth Development Settings

- Physical and Psychological Safety
- Appropriate Structure
- Supportive Relationships
- Opportunities to Belong
- Positive Social Norms
- Support for Efficacy and Mattering
- Opportunities for Skill Building
- Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

(parents, families, primary caregivers, neighbors, and employees) to provide support and opportunities for youth; reforming schools and other public institutions and services affecting youth; increasing the number and quality of developmental activities for youth; and realigning public policy and resources to support these community strategies.

Creating Effective Community Collaborations for Youth Programming

Youth-serving organizations, in conjunction with youth, parents, and community members, must develop a shared understanding of the needs of the young people in their community. They must decide together what youth need in order to develop into healthy, self-sufficient, and involved adults and how the community can best meet those needs. Through that collaborative process, they design a youth development framework and how to translate the framework into a vision for young people in their community (Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004).

To successfully address critical community issues requires an understanding of the process factors and contextual factors that influence the ability of a community organization to achieve their vision, mission, and outcomes. Once that understanding is realized, the community can begin to implement the process factors and contextual factors into their community.

Process Factors identify the internal components required of effective community groups. These “how to” factors address the skills needed to build effective community groups. Each factor covers a range of skills that impact the group process (Bergstrom, Clark, Hogue, Perkins, Slinski, & Associates, 1996). The six Process Factors are:

- **Understanding the Community**— requires knowledge of the people, culture, and their values and habits. This understanding provides the foundation for the work of the community group (i.e., community members and participating organizations). This broad understanding of the underlying values of the community enhances the group’s ability to successfully address specific issues.
- **Community Development**— requires knowledge of the attitudes and norms as well as the beliefs and values within the larger community. Further, a basis of trust must exist between the group and the larger community; without trust as a basis, the group will have difficulty moving forward in addressing the issue. Knowledge of community development prepares the group to position specific issues within the context of other community initiatives and, in turn, successfully meet their goals.
- **Leadership within the Community**— establishes norms of operation including protocols, conflict

resolutions, political and cultural sensitivity, group structure, team building, and clear roles and responsibilities. Group leaders must be able to work collectively with community members to successfully address the specific issue. Effective leadership is necessary in order to assure that diverse community members and organizations participate in the community group, ensuring broad community representation.

- **Communication**— improves group functioning and chances for success in the larger community. The group must establish norms of communication, including appropriate terminology and language. A plan for ongoing internal communication must also be determined (e.g., weekly phone calls, list-serves, teleconferencing, WebPages, email, and other methods). The group should identify the key community leaders who are critical to the identified issue and develop effective communication channels to engage them. Further, the group should develop social marketing strategies to inform and gain support from the larger community.
- **Research and Evaluation**— the use of current research and evaluation information will assist the community group to identify, clarify, and prioritize current trends and issues in the community that need to be addressed. The group must identify the types of research and evaluation data they need to address the identified issue. Reviewing the current data provides successful community models and reduces the duplication of efforts on a specific issue. An objective research and evaluation plan offers the group the opportunity to analyze and assess the successful attainment of their goals.
- **Sustainability**— the ability of a community group to have an ongoing effort to continually address a specific issue. Sustainability requires that systems be instituted in order to provide strategic planning; short and long-term planning; sustained membership; and the generating of revenue, time, and human resources. Further, it is important that a community group continually develop strategies that link the key community members and organizations in order to ensure the integration, and eventually, the institutionalization of the group’s efforts within the larger community.

Contextual Factors identify the characteristics of the external environment that influence the ability of the community group to successfully address the specific issue. This includes the physical settings, resources available in the community, and political atmosphere. Although a community group may be able to influence these characteristics, the group does not have control over these environments. The six Contextual Factors are:

- **Connectedness**— refers to the formal and informal types of linkages between individuals who feel a bond

with other individuals, between groups who share an association or sense of belonging, or communities that have a common understanding of principles and values.

- **History working together/Customs**— community groups that are established in communities with a history of working together in cooperation are more likely to be successful (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). These communities have used innovative problem solving and available resources to develop creative solutions to address specific issues.
- **Political Climate**— refers to the history and current environment of the political power and the decisions that are made which influence the lives of the community. The political climate includes the community as a whole, specific systems (e.g., government, schools, businesses, and others), organizations, networks, and groups of people. A diverse representation of the various political groups is necessary in order to influence decision makers and gain support and endorsement from various political entities.
- **Policies/Laws/Regulations**— contribute to both the political climate and the community environment. Cooperation of community members and organizations often depends on the current policies, laws, and regulations currently in place that impact how each one conducts their work. Therefore, an understanding of these constraints is critical to the success of the community group's work.
- **Resources**— include environmental, in-kind, financial (monetary), and most importantly, people (available time, creativity, talents, and expertise). In-kind resources are those that can be provided by the members of the community group, including facilities, supplies, equipment, and technology. The community group must determine if there is a supportive environment for their effort based on an understanding of each of the contextual factors discussed.
- **Catalysts**— in communities, there are often problems or issues which become the catalysts for community action (e.g., youth violence, drug prevention, family violence, community growth, healthcare, and others). Community members recognize the need for a response and engage the larger community to find possible solutions to the identified issue.

Conclusion

Successful collaborations require the investment of many stakeholders in a long-term process. Yet when communities invest in collaborations to provide high-quality youth programming, all stakeholders benefit: communities, schools, families, and youth. Collaborations enable the creation and maintenance of programming that truly meets the needs of all youth by utilizing the assets,

resources, and perspectives of the community as a whole. These collaborations are our best chance to achieve the goal of promoting the positive development of all youth so that all young people develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies they will need to not only succeed today, but also to become successful, engaged, and contributing adults (Reesing, Borden, Garza, 2004).

Internet Resources

4-H Afterschool: The 4-H Afterschool website has information regarding its mission, programs, a pdf document describing the organization, an online afterschool journal, resources (guide to starting 4-H clubs in afterschool organizations, staff training information, and a sampler of 4-H learning activities), grant opportunities, curricula, news, and mentors. There is also a section called Afterschool Partners, which lists and describes the eight partners of 4-H Afterschool. <http://www.4hafterschool.org/>

Boys and Girls Clubs of America: The Boys and Girls Clubs of America website provides information on its mission, programs, their partners, and updates. They also provide a pdf document of their 2004 Year in Review, a list of board members, and how to start a Boys and Girls Club. There is also a kid's center with links regarding youth members' achievements and its National Youth Day. <http://www.bgca.org/>

CYFER Network: The Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network is a comprehensive website that includes sections in Early Childhood, School Age, Teens, Parent/Family, and Community. Each section has practical and useful information to guide parents, including lists of sites and resources that are available. <http://www.cyfernet.org/>

One World Youth Project: One World Youth Project is a unique global sister-school initiative for middle and high school students, linking groups throughout the world together in learning partnerships. The One World Youth Project website is linked to a news page listing the current and recent stories of youth projects around the world. Many of the stories are reports written by the youth involved in the project. The site also includes many links on joining the project, satellite groups, forums, and project sites. <http://www.oneworldyouthproject.org/news.html>

The Forum for Youth Investment: The Forum for Youth Investment website provides information and resources regarding important issues, such as youth development, youth policy, out of school time, youth action, and education. It also provides information regarding its history, mission, and staff in addition to its publications, current projects, contact information, and e-newsletters. <http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/>

The National Collaboration for Youth: The National Collaboration for Youth is part of the National Human Services Assembly. This website provides information regarding its numerous member organizations, a pdf document regarding youth worker competencies, and descriptions of the Aging Caucus coalition and the Family

Strengthening Task Force. http://www.nassembly.org/nassembly/issue_coalitions.htm#1

YMCA: The YMCA website provides information on how to locate a local YMCA, information regarding the YMCA movement, an online store, how to become employed, and how to get involved (becoming a member/volunteer/donor). It also provides information regarding YMCA summer camps and how to start a new YMCA as well as links to YMCA International. <http://www.ymca.net/index.jsp>

Youth Service America: The Youth Service America website provides information regarding its programs and services, awards and grants, memberships, news and events, partners and sponsors, how to donate, contact information, and a description of their organization. It also has a section about National Youth Service Day (NYSYD) with links regarding tools, awards and grants, post project results, project ideas, and their partners and sponsors. <http://www.ysa.org/nysd/>

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