

Partnership's Time Has Come

Community-wide partnerships turn over responsibility for school reform to those who stand to benefit most—to teachers and parents and to students and their future employers.

It is time to escalate the cause of home-school-community partnership. Partnership is increasingly part of the rhetoric of school reform, but it is still too seldom part of the action agenda. One reason for this is that educational partnership represents a basically different approach to public education from the delegation/service delivery model we are used to. As long as everyone's roles and relationships remain defined by the current political and bureaucratic accountability system, genuine partnership between teachers, parents, students, and community will be hard to find.

Nevertheless, partnership's time has come, and school systems all over the country are more ready than ever before to try this new approach to public school reform. I suggest two different strategies for moving from rhetoric to action on educational partnership—a gradual strategy and a bolder strategy.

A Gradual Strategy

All approaches to partnership are gradual in one sense, since human institutions don't change quickly. But gradualism can also be a conscious strategy. Here are some ways to introduce partnership without announcing a revolution.

1. *School volunteers.* If you don't have a school volunteer program, start one. If you have one, expand it. The senior citizen volunteer program in Buffalo, New York, has recently grown from 8 to 280 volunteers, ranging in age from 56 to 94. Some school systems have over 20,000 volunteers working in their schools. Others have none. Why not? Because it's not part of the professional "service delivery" concept.¹

2. *Peer tutoring.* Research shows that peer tutoring is one of the most effective and cost-efficient activities a

school can use—and it's at the heart of partnership. It also doesn't fit the delegation/service-delivery model, which may explain why it is so seldom used in today's public schools.²

3. *Cooperative learning.* Cooperative learning engages students in helping each other learn and changes classrooms from sources of disruption and apathy into resources for learning and success. Again, though, it does not fit the model of service delivery and has therefore passed into disuse since we "progressed" from the one-room schoolhouse.³

4. *Business partnerships.* A new human dimension enters your school system when both institutions and individuals from the community relate to students as helpers instead of just taxpayers and voters. It's amazing how much difference it can make when students sense that somebody cares.

5. *Parent-teacher conferences.* The dreary rituals of parent-teacher confer-

ences accomplish little in many school systems, but they are an existing resource that can be used to strengthen home-school partnership. Beef them up so they are productive sessions for teachers and parents to plan *together* how they can *both* help students become successful learners. Houston and Indianapolis have made this a centerpiece of their respective "Fail-Safe" and "Parents-in-Touch" programs.

6. *Home visits.* Start or expand home visits, so that teachers, schools, and parents can develop the trust needed for cooperative, mutually supportive relationships. Teachers may need extra compensation and help from community workers for this purpose, but it is well worth it in terms of increased productivity.

7. *Alternative schools.* The alternative school movement, presumed dead or dying a few years ago, is alive and well and deserving of further expansion.⁴ The personal caring and



As part of the Houston Independent School District's Volunteers in the Public Schools Program (VIPS), Dorothy Cassetta, director of corporate marketing, Memorial Care Systems, tutors 2nd grade math at Helms Elementary School.

Photograph by Michael Hallaway, courtesy of Memorial Care Systems

sense of community found in alternative schools like the Satellite Academy in New York put partnership principles to work for students who need to assume more responsibility for their own and each other's learning and behavior. Now that clearer output standards are being applied to these schools, there is less danger of their becoming merely high-priced rap sessions. When responsibly handled they can become a reasonable step in a gradual approach to partnership.

These are all nonthreatening practices and can be instituted without having to raise the issue of "fundamental change." None of them by itself will shift a school system from a delegation model to a partnership model, but they can begin improving education almost immediately. And they all increase partnership and help schools and community work together for success, instead of blaming each other for failure. The time consumed during the gradual strategy can be put to good use in having a small group of school and community leaders study the partnership approach so they will understand it when the time comes to implement it more fully.⁵

Most school systems will only go so far with gradualism, however. As long as the main policy framework is delegation, service delivery, and bureaucratic accountability, partnership is usually kept at the fringe. Only a tiny amount of money (or none at all) is made available for recruiting and training volunteers. Peer tutoring is left up to the enterprising teachers who want to take the extra trouble to organize it. And no resources are made available even to find out about cooperative learning, let alone try it.

If you want to move more forcefully into partnership, it may be time for a bolder approach—one that would move it from the fringe of the school system to the center of educational reform.

A Bolder Strategy

Here are some possible steps for a bolder strategy:

1. *Focus on the learning gap.* It has been difficult for school officials to talk seriously about the gap between what students are learning and what they could and should be learning. Many people fear that this will only increase



Parent-teacher partnerships at the Houston Independent School District begin when teachers and parents plan a program to meet an individual student's needs. Simon Gonzalez, Lantrip Elementary School teacher, meets with Imelda Baez, parent.

the blame placed on the school system, but the time may be ripe for courageously facing reality.

While making clear that your purpose is not to blame anyone but only to identify a problem that everyone can work on together, try to get a rough estimate in the community (whether it be a school, school district, or entire state) as to what percentage of students arrive at high school unable to do high school-level work. This need not be an exact measure; use whatever combination of test scores and teacher judgments seems practical.

Once the estimate is made, determine whether the community is satisfied with this level of preparation for high school. If the community is satisfied, forget about bold new approaches; there won't be support for them. My prediction, however, is that few communities will be satisfied with what they find.

My rough estimate from travels around the country is that in most school systems anywhere from 20 to 60 percent of the students entering high school are not prepared to handle high school-level work. Is it not clear that these large groups of students headed toward high school failure are the very groups from which dropouts, disruptive behavior, unemployment, crime, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and so on must be expected?

If people are dissatisfied with the percentages revealed by the estimate, you are ready for step two.

2. *Suggest a community-wide effort to close the gap.* Skip over the usual months-long "needs assessment" fol-

lowed by another year for a goals committee to produce a list of platitudes. This too often leads to obfuscation and delay. *Let the gap define the need, and the community's dissatisfaction define the goal.* Then (and this is crucial) do not follow the usual route of looking to the schools alone to close the gap. Instead, discuss on a community-wide basis what the community as a whole can do to close the gap—beginning with the schools, but including the parents, community agencies, churches, local businesses, and the students themselves (both in assuming responsibility for their own learning and helping others learn).

Don't expect everyone to agree with this approach. In fact, expect many people to say it is "impractical," "visionary," "unprofessional," and "not the way we do things." Some will point out that other school systems aren't doing it, that it wasn't recommended by the blue-ribbon panel or the costly foundation study, or that it's a diversion from the wonderful innovations the school system has just announced or is about to institute once it finishes its needs-assessment, goal-setting, implementation-planning, and in-service-training phases.

Remind them that "the way we do things" hasn't been working very well, and ask them honestly whether they really expect the latest innovations to close the learning gap identified in step one. Suggest that they *consider* a different approach. Suggest that blue-ribbon panels and foundation studies can be trapped by obsolete models just as school systems can, and try to have lined up ahead of time a few influential people from the schools

and community who will support undertaking a community-wide approach. You don't have to go into a lot of theory or educational philosophy; the urgency of the problem and the common sense of the proposal may be enough to carry the day.

Another thing *not* to do: don't ask whether people are for or against parent involvement or argue about who should have how much power. *Get to work* finding ways to collaborate in closing the gap. Too many efforts at participation have bogged down from arguing over power before people had a common goal to work for. Once an important common goal is established, those who are working together to achieve it will be more likely to share decision making naturally, and disagreements over power can be settled in the context of a common enterprise rather than a "we/they" struggle.

You will have to deal with this question: can poor, single, and working parents be partners? The answer is unequivocally "yes." Surveys have shown that single and working parents care as much as other parents about the educational success of their children, and are as willing to help them succeed as long as they know what to do and how to do it.⁶ This does not mean that working parents can be expected to come to the school at 10 a.m. (unless their employers give time off for school responsibilities, which some do when there is real partnership in the community). Adjustments have to be made for changes in family patterns, but the most important adjustment is to start expecting parental responsibility from the first moment a child enters school, if not earlier. Some schools present parents with a "parents-as-partners" workbook when their children enroll in kindergarten. Wonderful materials are available from The Home and School Institute and other sources for parents to use with their children at home, and training is available to help teachers and parents use them.⁷ For children whose parents can't help adequately, resources such as parent support groups, peer tutors, local churches, and various community agencies can fill the gap; that is the reason for a *community-wide* campaign. Poor and single parents are not the only ones who need support in helping their children become successful students.

Don't let extraneous political arguments divert attention from your work. Ignore ideologues of the left and right who argue on the one hand that nothing can be done about public education until social and economic justice is achieved, and on the other that nothing should be done about public education anyway (except maybe abolish it) because it is socialistic. The point is that a community campaign to help students become well prepared for high school is good for everyone—a genuinely common objective that can unite people of every political persuasion.

This doesn't mean the campaign can't take on its own political flavor, however, with banners, stickers, and whatever else will get people on the bandwagon in your community. Houston put millions of dollars worth of donated public service spots into its

Fail-Safe Program. Some communities might even use the old "thermometer in the center of town" technique, showing the current gap and a goal to shoot for (e.g., 95 percent by 1995).

Once a campaign spirit is under way, all individual partnership activities will take on new momentum. Volunteers will be easier to recruit; teachers will have an extra handle for promoting cooperative learning in the classroom; businesses will be more inclined to join in an important community campaign; and everyone's morale will improve as they find themselves working together on worthwhile common objectives.

3. *Talk up partnership.* Although dissatisfaction with the status quo, frustration with past failures, and common sense may be enough to persuade many people to go along with a community-wide campaign, it will still take some effort to get people to operate in this new way. Help people understand that this is a different and better way of getting the job done—a way that will work and is therefore worth the investment in time, effort, and money. Explain how it will expand the resources available for education and increase the productivity of educational tax dollars. Show how it will make teachers more effective by presenting them with more motivated students, who are readier to help themselves and each other learn. Explain that a growing consensus of research shows that parent and community partnership increases academic achievement and character development.⁸

Be sure to talk about this different approach with all stakeholders in the community: not only school administrators and school board, but also civic, parent, and business groups. And don't forget teachers and students. Teachers have been too little involved in discussions of school reform, and they will have much to offer both in ideas and support once they see something that might really work for a change. And students might be the secret weapon that can change the whole picture. They have less invested in old ways of operating and a high self-interest in making school more satisfying. They have a strong strain of idealism and good will and can help not only implement but lead the way to partnership.



The Senior Volunteers in the Schools in Buffalo, New York is a partnership between the Buffalo Public Schools and the Center for the Study of Aging, SUNY—Buffalo. Top, students at School 31 show appreciation for Mrs. James Robinson. Bottom, volunteer Jennie Ballachino, 86 years of age, was a student at School 77.

Photographs courtesy of Kenneth J. Echols

While partnership differs from the prevailing model of school reform thinking, people may be more ready for these ideas than in the past. They are more aware that something is fundamentally wrong with the school system. They are more frustrated with the many reforms that haven't worked. And they are more aware that even factories don't operate like factories anymore in our most progressive industries. They apply many of the same partnership principles now required in education, but with one important adaptation: in education the *students* are the prime workers, and to be productive, the students, as well as the teachers and parents, must have a sense of ownership and be responsible members in a community of shared values.⁹

4. *Ask for money for partnership.* Partnership doesn't cost much money, especially in relation to its benefits, but some investment is needed to move beyond the initial stages. It costs money for workshops to orient parents, teachers, and citizens to a different approach. It takes money to recruit, train, and coordinate volunteers, peer tutors, and business partners. Some money will have to be spent to support home visits and coordinate with community agencies. If your school board is reluctant to approve such expenditures, ask some of your business partners to explain how "conversion costs" pay for retooling an industry or for introducing a new business process. They know that failure to invest in necessary conversion costs leads to failure and bankruptcy. Any community unwilling to pay the costs to convert is not genuinely interested in shifting to a partnership approach—and not serious about meeting its educational challenges. The new community education foundations now forming around the country or perhaps industry itself might be willing to help pay some of the extra transition costs.

5. *Don't blame people.* Little will be gained and much lost from trying to find out who is to blame for past failures. The fact is that we have been working at school reform in the wrong way, and many good people's efforts have gone awry because of the dysfunctions of the system. The only solution is to forget the past and start out on a new cooperative basis.

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6. *Legitimate scare tactics.* When the river is rising dangerously and it's time to call for volunteers to save the levee, nothing is wrong with sounding the alarm. Likewise, nothing is wrong with reminding people that public education is in danger if we don't rise to the challenge. The bugaboo of vouchers and tuition tax credits has already probably done more to alert people to the need for a new approach to public education than all the books and articles of reformers put together. Don't hesitate to remind people that this may be our last chance.

A New Vision of Public Education

We are in the midst of a reform movement in which improvements in educational policy and technology can bring success if—and only if—they operate within a framework of partnership. Teachers, principals, and volunteer coordinators in schools across the country have seen and felt the power of educational partnership, and they have experienced rewarding results in their own classrooms, schools, and programs. What many of them don't realize is that they have hold of what America is looking for: a new and more optimistic approach to educational reform.

It's time to escalate the cause of home-school-community partnership to a new level of importance. It's time to start talking about:

- not just the *desirability* of partner-

ship, but its *centrality* to school reform;

- not just *parent* participation, but *community, business, teacher, and student* partnership;

- not just *participation* and *involvement*, but *partnership* and *collaboration* to achieve shared goals;

- not just some nice little programs to add to the present system, but a *new approach* to public education.

It's time to tell people that the risks of staying with the status quo are greater than those of uniting people around a new vision of public education.

1. *Partnerships in Education* (Alexandria, Va.: National School Volunteer Program, 1985), p. 8.

2. *The Youth Tutoring Youth Model: An Evaluation* (New York: National Commission for Resources for Youth, 1972); *New Roles for Youth in the School and the Community* (New York: Citation Press, 1974).

3. Robert E. Slavin, *Cooperative Learning* (New York: Longman, 1983).

4. Mary Ann Raywid, *The Current Status of Schools of Choice in Public Secondary Education* (Hofstra University, Project on Alternatives in Education, 1982); *More Lessons from Alternative High Schools* (New York: Public Education Association, 1984).

5. Seymour Sarason points out the possible value of such a "study" activity as follows: "If anything is clear in the history of educational innovations and improvements, it has been the failure of policymakers to put ideas into currency before putting them into action." *Schooling in America: Scapegoat and Salvation* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 154.

6. Jovce L. Epstein, "School Policy and Parent Involvement: Research Results," *Educational Horizons* (Winter 1984): 70-72.

7. Dorothy Rich, *The Forgotten Factor in School Success: The Family* (Washington, D.C.: The Home and School Institute, 1985).

8. Oliver C. Moles, "Synthesis of Recent Research on Parent Participation in Children's Education," *Educational Leadership* 40 (November 1982): 44-47.

9. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Reinventing the Corporation* (New York: Warner, 1985).

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