

## WHY WORK WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS?

The academic achievement gap in the United States persists. Up to two-thirds of this disparity is attributed to larger social structures, most notably poverty.<sup>1</sup> Principles of developmental science tell us that to enter school ready to access curriculum and instruction, children require holistic supports. However, access to resources to support “the whole child” is challenging for many schools, families, and urban, suburban, and rural communities.<sup>2</sup> The effects of resource disparities have drawn attention during the Covid-19 closures, as schools transitioned to online instruction requiring access to technology devices, internet services, and conditions conducive to online learning.

Creating partnerships with agencies and organizations in the surrounding community is one way that schools and districts can more comprehensively support students. These school-community partnerships provide a comprehensive array of supports and enrichment opportunities that can be tapped through a systematic approach to addressing out-of-school barriers that interfere with academic success and healthy development.<sup>5</sup> For instance, integrated student support has emerged as a systematic approach for matching students with a tailored student support plan, often through leveraging resources in the community.<sup>6</sup>

Although many schools already partner with community institutions in some capacity, most do not implement standardized practices for organizing and managing these partnerships. To support this critical work in the school context, practices schools can integrate into their existing infrastructure are offered below.

### EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

Grounded in tenets of child development and practical knowledge from one evidence-based intervention, City Connects, six effective practices for referring students to community partner-provided services are presented below:

1. How to recognize student needs
2. How to collaborate with families/guardians
3. How to identify community partners
4. How to establish relationships
5. How to anticipate logistical barriers
6. How to appropriately follow-up on referrals



## 1. HOW TO RECOGNIZE STUDENT NEEDS

It is important to assess a student’s holistic set of strengths and needs. One way schools can gather this information is to consult with multiple sources.

- Student. Student reports and behaviors can raise “red flags” and spark further investigation into student circumstances through consultation with other sources.
- Family. Family reports on difficulties their child is having at home often relate to their performance in school which may not be directly observable or that are not currently being addressed.
- Teachers. Teachers are a critical source of knowledge given their often consistent contact with parents regarding school and home concerns.
- Principal/school officials. School officials have important information about student crises that occur during the school day or during non-classroom times (e.g., lunch, hallways). They are also often aware of school-specific and broader trends that call attention to particular needs.
- School counselors. School counselors may be aware of needs for students who frequently check-in throughout the school day/week or take part in group or individual counseling. Further, through classroom observations or a guidance curriculum, school counselors may observe students struggling in class.
- Community partners. Community Partners working with students in or outside the school may notice student difficulties or strengths that could be further attended to.

For more information about recognizing student needs see [Reviewing Every Student](#).

## 2. HOW TO COLLABORATE WITH FAMILIES/GUARDIANS

Family buy-in is essential for successful service provision, particularly for supports received outside of the school building.

- Build early relationships. Be proactive and discuss student strengths with families prior to reaching out with concerns.
- Consider an appropriate contact person. Is there a particular school staff member that should contact a family? This person may have an already-existing relationship and can cultivate an open, trustful line of communication between the school and family (e.g., teacher assistant, school nurse, school counselor or principal).
- Consider language barriers. Prior to reaching out to a family, consider potential communication barriers as well as methods for ensuring clear collaboration. The student should not act as the translator between the school official and family, and the communicator should be a trusted person. Does a school staff member speak the same language as this family? If the school does not have a person to provide language translation, an outside translator would be appropriate. This person should purely serve to translate what the trusted person is communicating. Further, does the family require written information in their spoken language?
- Be culturally aware. Listen carefully for a family's attitudes and cultural beliefs regarding services for their child or family and approach these discussions with an open and curious perspective.
- Be persistent and patient. Make multiple attempts to connect with families and consider innovative methods such as sending a letter home with the student or looking for parents at school drop-off and pick-up times, sending a text, or setting up a video call. One call home is not enough. Approach this process with empathy. Many families work intensive or multiple jobs at non-standard times of the day and therefore may be less available for communicating. Be persistent so that as little time as possible passes between the recognition of a student need and the provision of services to address this need.

For more information about working with families, see [Connecting Children and Families to Resources](#).



## 3. HOW TO IDENTIFY COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Do your homework prior to referring students to services and supports provided by community partners. After analyzing your school's resource landscape and developing an organized approach to categorizing services (see [Analyzing the Resource Landscape](#)), it is important to keep in mind the following characteristics of the agencies and organizations in your community to ensure a high quality match.

- Proximity. How will the family get to services outside of the school? What is their mode of transportation (e.g., car, bus/train, by foot)? How far away is the agency from the school? Can providers travel to your school instead? Is the provider offering online services, or alternative means of access due to social distancing? If so, is the family able to connect?
- Health insurance and cost. Does the provider accept the student's health insurance or can the family afford the referred service? Keep in mind that many providers available to come into the school are not licensed so it is important to confirm whether the student's insurance will cover these services.
- Language. How will the provider and family communicate? Parents may not speak the same language as their child, and the child often should not act as translator.
- Cultural competency. The provider must be culturally considerate with respect to race, ethnicity, culture, and other identities to facilitate the development of a trusting relationship between the provider and family. Some districts may not have access to agencies that prioritize cultural considerations. It is therefore important to approach consultation with all community partners through a culturally aware lens, advocating for the needs of your students and their families. This may require engaging in difficult conversations with service providers surrounding your concerns in an open and empathetic manner.

- Treatment type. Although many community partner services are provided in the school, a student may require more intensive services outside of the school building. It may be important to consider a balance of the child's needs and the family's cultural views.
- Time of day. What will a student miss in order to receive supports? Scheduling services during times that work best with student needs is essential. For example, if the student is struggling with math, scheduling a service during this class will not benefit the student. Further, if a student requires a service but does not have access to services outside of the school building, invite providers into the school during the day. And if the student is engaged in distance learning, consider the students' schedule and environment when establishing telehealth or other virtual service delivery.

#### EXAMPLE

Your school recently experienced an increase in the Haitian student population. Although you have a strong and already existing partnership with a community mental health center, consider seeking alternate mental health providers who have an understanding of cultural and linguistic considerations for this specific population. To support your search, contact a mental health referral service for insight into providers. Further, a school counselor can establish a school-based counseling group - either in person or virtually - to support a subset of students waiting for individual outpatient treatment. This approach can lead to a more tailored, effective match for the student and his or her family.

## 4. HOW TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS

A positive school-community partnership impacts the quality of services provided to the student and lays the groundwork for future collaboration.

- Shared information. How collaborative is the provider? Do they keep information regarding the student to themselves, or do they offer updates to school-based counselors, teachers and school officials? The best approach to supporting student needs is a collaborative one.
- Consider legal requirements. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects the confidentiality of student education records. Therefore, parents/guardians need to give written permission for educational information (e.g., IEP/504 plans) to be shared with other systems, including community partners. Similarly, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protects the confidentiality of healthcare information. As such, community health-based institutions require release forms from parents to share health information with the school. Understanding these laws that protect health information privacy is important for legal and timely collaboration across systems.
- Create a shared culture. Finding ways to integrate community partners into the school culture is essential. Many providers are not salaried workers, and therefore get paid per session/program. This creates an issue surrounding their ability to extend services to other students in a school or work within the school's schedule. The school can establish meetings with community partners to discuss the school environment and their goals, while at the same time, listen to community partner goals and requirements. Direct communication of each institution's needs will support a collaborative relationship.



#### EXAMPLE

A student in your school had an IEP meeting today. A community partner working closely with this student in an after-school tutoring program asked for a copy of the IEP and education evaluation to support their tutoring. Proactive communication with the student's parent at the IEP meeting allows you to get a signed release form right away so you can provide the partner with this information in a timely manner. This approach supports alignment across the student's academic services, while it additionally builds a collaborative and reliable relationship between the school and partner.

## 5. HOW TO ANTICIPATE LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

Proactively consider common logistical factors that may delay or interrupt services provided by community partners.

- **Space.** It is important to assess where community partners have space to work within the school. Work to agree upon a consistent location as soon as possible. Notifying other school officials of this blocked time will eliminate potential “double-booking” of space, as well as wasted service time trying to find a second option.
- **Connectivity.** If a community partner is providing students with virtual services or enrichment opportunities, consider whether the student has access to any needed technology, internet access, and the time and space to engage with the service provider.
- **Thresholds.** Many agencies require a minimum number of students in order to visit the school that day. For instance, if a provider requires 7 slots and only 5 students are available, the provider may not come. This is a significant concern, as those 5 students will miss out on services they need. Mindfully scheduling sessions and being aware of numbers can be the difference between children receiving or not receiving services.
- **Waitlists.** Many agencies have waitlists for new students depending on the number of available community agencies in close vicinity to the school. It is important to not only consider this issue when identifying potential community partners, but to be proactive about referrals and have a back-up plan for students during the waitlist period.
- **High employee turnover.** Community-based agencies often have high turnover rates which can lead to inconsistent service delivery and communication. For instance, a student may meet with a counselor or mentor in the beginning of the year, and this individual may leave the agency within a few months. Identify potential negative consequences of this transition on the student and create a plan to ease these impacts.
- **One size does not fit all.** Community agencies differ in their processes, such as requiring different forms from parents/guardians and accepting different health insurance types. Do not assume that systematic processes exist across agencies, and ask questions from the start regarding this process to ensure the school and parent/guardian complete information necessary for services to begin.
- **New school year requirements.** Community agencies often require updated paperwork at the beginning of each school year, regardless of whether the student received the same service in the previous school year. This can cause confusion with parents/guardians and create a lengthy delay in initiating services.

### EXAMPLE

Multiple students in your school have a visiting social worker they meet with once/week for individual counseling as their families do not have access to this service outside of the school day. Prior to beginning this service, consider the days and times the social worker can come to the school and find an available, confidential space (e.g., small room in the library, education specialist room, etc.). Consider finding a space that is available on the same days and times each week. To facilitate clear communication with school staff, hang a calendar on the door that blocks off the room for the social worker's time with the students and update this calendar each month. Alternatively, if counseling is now being provided as a telehealth service, work with both the student and the provider to identify a time and space for comfortable communication, if possible.

## 6. HOW TO APPROPRIATELY FOLLOW UP ON REFERRALS

Remember, the partnership continues after a referral is made.

- **Check student-service match.** Does the student or family have any issues with the provider? Does the provider report a productive relationship with the student? If the student and their family is experiencing a barrier to obtaining the referred service, can you help to address this difficulty?
- **Take a collaborative approach.** When working in a school setting, communication across all members who interact with a student is essential. Check-in with teachers, teacher aides, the school nurse, etc. to see whether student performance or behavior has changed since beginning a service. It is important to also regularly communicate this feedback to the partner providing a service.
- **Monitor progress.** The most effective way to assess improvement is to measure student gains. In anticipation of limited in-person observations and interactions with the student during distance learning, it is important to think about means of measuring progress proactively and creatively. This can be done through the use of quantitative data, such as questionnaires or in-class observations, as well as qualitative data, such as check-ins with the student's family or teacher.
- **Consider future plans.** Is the service intended to be short- or long-term? If it is short-term, does the student need to be re-evaluated or receive a step-down service? If it is long-term, are goals updated along the way? Are these timelines and goals clearly communicated between the school and community partner? How will the intervention or service be affected as schools close for the pandemic or for the summer? How will the intervention or service be affected by a return to in-person learning?

## CONCLUSION

Schools work hard to support the holistic needs of their students. However, they often lack the resources necessary to accomplish this goal alone. This reality requires the integration of community partnerships into a school's comprehensive student support plan in order to provide students with holistic academic and non-academic services and opportunities that support their academic success and wellbeing. For schools or districts, applying effective practices can help create a structured, organized approach to working with community partners as part of a broader system of integrated student support.



### CITATIONS

<sup>1</sup> Rothstein, R. (2010). How to fix our schools. Issue Brief, 286.

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<sup>3</sup> Walsh, M.E., Brabeck, M.M., Howard, K.A., Sherman, F.T., Montez, C., & Garvin, T.J. (2000). The Boston College-Allston/Brighton Collaboration: Description and Challenges. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75(3), 6-32.

<sup>4</sup> American School Counselor Association (2015). State-by-state student-to-counselor ratio report: 10-year trends. National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).

<sup>5</sup> American School Counselor Association (2012). *The ASCA National Model: A framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, K.A., Lantos, H., Jones, R., Schindler, A., Belford, J., & Sacks, V. (2017). *Making the grade: A progress report and next steps for integrated student supports*. Bethesda, MS: Child Trends.

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