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Partnership Perspectives: Empowering Stakeholders

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Introduction

Public education was designed around a visionary concept which called for knowledgeable individuals with the skills to make sound decisions. Enculturation of our society continues to be the primary goal of educational systems. In order to educate our youth and keep pace with the sweeping changes in basic societal structures, new ways of dealing with those changes must emerge. Education must adopt a futuristic role which is more responsive to the needs of the various institutions upon which it impacts. Survival skills literacy is simply not sufficient to support the myriad technologies that abound today. Predictions of needed competencies for the information explosion of the future must be projected from the present. "What we know is what we use to design what we become" (Byrne, 1988). Mere access to information is not education. It is not only what we know, but what it means and how we can use it that is the test of the truly educated.

If education is to be responsive to the needs of our society, it must change and adapt to those needs or it will render itself obsolete. As education has progressed from the one room school designed to meet the needs of an early industrial and agricultural society through the present demands of this technological age, bureaucratic organization and shortsighted philosophies have become outmoded. Time is no longer a luxury we can afford. With the mounting pressures of the breakdown in societal structures, schools must engage in futuristic rather than reactionary planning. Plans for change must project future needs and propose innovative avenues for approaching solutions. According to Goodlad (1986), a redefinition of the role of education is required to include a clear delineation of the desired functions of schools is necessary, a clear articulation of the goals of schooling, a fresh commitment to both excellence and equity, and an understanding of how these can be forwarded simultaneously.

Past attempts to "fix" the schools one crisis at a time have resulted in disillusionment. Educational partnerships

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provide one of the best vehicles for realizing a new direction. This issue is addressed by the Holmes group (1988) as they advocate the joining of other agencies with schools in order to "... forge strong relations ..." and assist in the process of transforming schools. The efforts of various institutions, organizations, and individuals as they engage in partnership endeavors provide the best step forward in redefining fundamental roles. As Seeley (1987) notes "Only by putting the relevant players together in more productive and cooperative relationships as partners in a common enterprise is there any hope of achieving the new goals."

A Partnership Venture

Such a collaborative venture occurred on the campus of Kansas State University in the summer of 1988. The Manhattan, Kansas public school system joined with the Kansas State University College of Education to form a partnership seminar. The seminar was planned and funded by both institutions.

Participants were selected on an application basis and included ten public school teachers and one administrator. The seminar addressed public school-university partnership concepts focusing on the roles of research, theory, and practical applications. The format consisted of a survey of current literature and research, speakers who addressed existing partnerships, and group discussions. The establishment of a broad informational base led to the development of collaborative projects by the seminar participants. It further created an awareness for the need to continue this dialogue, to develop a governance structure, and to create new partnerships which emphasize a collaborative nature.

A distinction needs to be made regarding a collaborative versus a cooperative process. A collaborative effort implies that participants complement, not merely supplement each other. There must be shared planning, authority, responsibility, and accountability (Hoyt, 1988). Cooperation, on the other hand, implies that two individuals or organizations with separate needs and self interests work parallel to each other in order to reach individual goals.

Reaching new ground requires a rigorous process whereby individuals and institutions redefine their basic roles. While this may seem a simple or common sense approach, in reality it calls for restructuring of ways of thinking about schools. The following description illustrates how this process can occur.

Several years ago, the Manhattan public school system initiated an intensive school improvement program. Drawing on such recommendations as Effective Schools Research and the Carnegie Report, a concerted effort was made to further improve an already effective school system. This led to the school district's participation in the IDEA School Improvement Program. This program provided training and materials to key members of the school community in order to facilitate team building and skill building among groups of site based planning teams. Collaborative efforts within the school district and the community began with the design of an ideal vision for what the schools could be and a realistic evaluation of present programs. The cyclical nature of the change model allowed for a redefinition of goals and objectives and a restructuring of existing programs. This experience provided a fundamental shift in basic education philosophies and led to the empowerment of the stakeholders.

Personal experiences with the processes of change brought about by dynamic leadership and an effective change model caused committed individuals to recognize their professional integrity and validated their efforts. This insight led to the assumption that new partnerships will

evolve and endure. Such a collaborative inquiry denotes a process of self study—of generating and acting upon knowledge in context, by and for the people who use it. (Heckman, Oakes, and Sirotnik, 1983). The unique nature of the School Improvement model has allowed more time for inquiry, empowered stakeholders in the inquiry process, provided a framework for the improvement of programs, and established a structure for maintaining or upgrading those programs.

Whatever the nature of the partnership or the delivery of the change model, it is imperative that the outcomes in terms of values, practices, and benefits share a mutual vision for the highest quality education for youth. In order for the partnerships to be successful, a symbiotic relationship must occur (Goodlad, 1986). To achieve optimum mutual benefits, the following partnership components must be in place:

- *Involve truly committed people* with a clear vision for meeting mutual goals.
- *Based on sufficient trust* to leave one's turf and ignore tradition.
- *Share equally* the leadership, planning, decision-making, responsibility, and accountability.
- *Contain a purposeful mechanism* with policy and structure that encourages and supports improvement.
- *Include a process for change* which is cyclical and regenerative.
- *Involve equitable relationships* that are complementary rather than supplementary.
- *Include the satisfaction of self-interests* which are mutually beneficial.
- *Require an envisioning process* for the enhancement of goals.
- *Create avenues of accessibility* for the enculturation of our society.

The Partnership Seminar conducted on the Kansas State University campus initiated a number of new proposals. They were generated by empowered individuals and exemplify the components of the partnership process. The following brief description of the proposals evidences the commitment to the outlined components:

- *Manhattan Writing Project*—a literary community interested in and devoted to the study of communication. The National Writing Project will provide support and structure for teacher to share classroom experiences with other interested professionals (Combs and Seymour, 1988).
- *Collaborative Partnership Plan*—a partnership between Northview School and Kansas State University mathematics professors to study the use of mathematics manipulatives and provide a support base for improving the teaching and learning of mathematics (Hendricks and Spiker, 1988).
- *Partnership Institute*—a proposal whose purpose is to offer a meeting place for prospective partners, to document existing partnerships and analyze their success, and to match partners according to their interests in order to develop new partnerships. The Institute will also offer publishing opportunities describing the above activities (Northern, 1988).

- *Public School–University Partnership Governance Structure*—a fluid governance document which sets up a process or framework for partnership development and practice and encourages institutional change through collaboration and partnership (Talley, 1988).
- *Proposal for Improving Public School Climate Through Collaborative Effort*—envisions the establishment of "The Collaborative Center for Educational Equity and Excellence" which would organize the expertise of education professionals in such a way that efficient and effective exchanges of information between school districts, researchers, practitioners, and other interested citizens could take place (Anderson and Olson, 1988).
- *Professional Efficacy Plan*—A community-based apprenticeship plan which establishes a partnership of committed people formed to create a strong conceptual foundation of means, and designed to develop professional efficacy in future educators at Kansas State University (Conkwright and DeNoon, 1988).

The variety of the outlined proposals illustrates that partnerships are as unique as the individuals who form them. Such diversity in planning complements the needs of the individual learner. Our multicultural society demands that we respect the rich diversity of its members, yet realize the necessity for unity in responsibility. The same is true of partnerships. The schools have an opportunity to connect with as many institutions as possible to enrich and enhance learning. However, they must concurrently maintain their clear sense of direction and vision.

Conclusion

The process of empowerment is a slow and gradual evolution. Change occurs in small increments which, upon reflection, lead to quiet celebrations. As stakeholders become empowered, they conceive a new vision and will work toward making that a vision a reality.

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Book Review

School-University Partnerships in Action: Concepts, Cases and Concerns, edited by Kenneth A. Sirotnik and John I. Goodlad. Teachers College Press, 1988.

As editors Kenneth A. Sirotnik and John I. Goodlad point out, the "idea of recognizing formal or informal connections between individuals, groups and/or organizations as a means of furthering the interests of at least one or more of the members is not new" to American education. Nearly one hundred years ago the Committee of Ten on Secondary Studies was brought together under the direction of Charles W. Eliot. The group consisted of five college presidents, a college professor, two headmasters of private secondary schools, a public high school principal, and the United States Commissioner of Education. The group was to address the need for a uniform requirement for college entrance. During the 1930s more than three hundred colleges joined thirty secondary schools to examine the performance of the high school graduates in the college setting. The collaboration today is known as The Eight-Year Study.

Recent studies on the state of education and the resulting reforms proposed have served to usher in a new phase of school-university partnerships. Sirotnik and Goodlad identify several reasons why such alliances are currently being formed. First, the political nature of educational reform necessitates at least a symbolic association among those who have a stake in education. Second, the shift in American society from dependence upon industry to dependence upon information and services has heightened awareness of institutional interdependency. Third, which is crucial to the thesis of the text, is the premise that positive theoretical and practical reasons for collaboration exist among institutions "struggling with related aspects of a common problem."

The editors assert that the task forces and commissions of recent years have, in their zeal to identify the sources of inefficiency in education, focused on the short

term solution of rehabilitating or replacing the individuals within the instructional setting identified as being ineffective. While conceding that the identification may be correct, Sirotnik and Goodlad suggest that an alternative approach in which individual and instructional renewal occur simultaneously is in order.

But making partnerships work for all concerned is no easy task. Kenneth Sirotnik argues that a thorough evaluative self-study by all participants must occur throughout the collaborative inquiry. Such analysis will ideally lead to the examination of practices and assumptions which have shaped educational theory and methodology and will pit them against the interests, needs, and goals of the individuals and institutions involved. From an enlightened stance, future courses of action may be logically prescribed.

Contributors Schlechty and Whitford, in their essay on shared problems of a shared vision, stress that organic relationships are needed to insure partnership success. In such relationships emphasis is placed on the common good and not the good of one faction to the exclusion or diminution of another. Issues of concern are seen as belonging not to one segment of the partnership, but as being a communal problem, shared equally among the various participants. Ideally, shared problems will result in jointly contrived solutions, providing, of course, the vision is one mutually acceptable to all involved. The variables inherent in such an undertaking are indeed disturbing, a point well taken by the authors. Drawing on the fragile nature of such an endeavor, Schlechty and Whitford propose a professionalization of teaching as a method by which the gap might be bridged.

In examining the various concepts and concerns of school-university partnerships, the editors have compiled a text replete with clarification of terminology, a brief history of partnerships, projections for future collaborations and actual case histories of school-university partnerships. Contributors aid in the examination of the successes of such enterprises as well as the inherent problems. Through careful examination of previous and existing partnerships, practical and rational guidelines for collaboration emerge.

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