

BEYOND LESSONS IN THE FIELD

Creating and Sustaining Partnerships in Promise Neighborhoods

Sharing the Mission, Achieving Results

Vibrant partnerships are critical to a successful Promise Neighborhoods initiative. For purposes of this paper, the term “partnership” refers to the joint arrangement between the lead agency and one or more organizations and/or individuals working on a shared mission aimed squarely at improving specific outcomes for low-income children and their families. Partnerships exist within an environment that ensures collective accountability for desired results. In Promise Neighborhoods, partnerships typically include schools, community organizations that work with children and families, local government, and resident leaders.

Several types of partnerships can be created. The ideal arrangement depends on the unique circumstances within each community. In a project-specific partnership, the lead agency maintains strong control over the governance and operation of the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, but enlists partner agencies to provide specific services. On the other end of the spectrum, the lead agency, other organizations, and residents share decision-making authority over the governance of the initiative. In this model, partners jointly select interventions and monitor progress to keep the work on track.

Partnerships include a wide range of voices and enable residents to play an active role in decision-making. Often the biggest challenge is building trust among a diverse group of people who may not have worked together before.

Department of Education Requirements

The Department of Education (DOE) lists the development of partnerships as one of the activities to be undertaken during the planning year.¹ This includes getting commitments from partners, developing a strategy for holding partners accountable for milestones, and forming a governance structure. Sites must establish a written memorandum of understanding that spells out the programmatic and financial commitments of each partner.²

Six key questions and answers from the field

1. When should a project use partnerships and why?

Both governance and service partnerships offer Promise Neighborhoods significant benefits. They bring in needed expertise from multiple organizations; they attract different perspectives, which often lead to

stronger interventions; and they build critical buy-in among stakeholders, which can be crucial for sustaining the work over the long-term.

Yet partnerships also add layers of complexity onto an already challenging environment. Tasks may take longer to get done; more staff may be required to manage complicated relationships; and decision-making can get murky when there is no consensus. Some people say working in multi-party partnerships is like herding cats: No sooner is one partner brought in line than another runs in a different direction.

Lead agencies therefore need to ask themselves: given what kind of organization we are and want to be, is it more advantageous to establish a partnership for the governance of the initiative or build partnerships for specific areas of the work?

Lead agencies may choose to build a governance partnership when:

- they believe they will be able to achieve more than if they work independently,
- they have strong partners,
- they have an accountability structure for the partnership, and
- the extra layers can be managed efficiently.

If the lead agency is highly resourced, competent, and well-respected, and no similar organizations are working in the community, the agency may choose to govern the initiative itself and tap partners only for specific services. For example, when start-up costs for a new program would be too expensive and/or another agency already has the needed expertise, the lead agency may launch a partnership for a particular program or service.

An example from the Harlem Children's Zone

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) illustrates how one community organization makes decisions about when and how to use partnerships. HCZ defines three levels of partnerships it engages in and describes its role in each:

- **Type 1:** The entire HCZ Pipeline is a series of partnerships between programs so that they are integrated and coordinated. For example, staff from the Baby College meet regularly with staff from the Harlem Gems Universal Pre-Kindergarten and Head Start programs, so children flow easily from one program to the next, curriculums are coordinated and mapped and data is used to drive instruction.
- **Type 2:** HCZ is a supporting partner: Another agency is in the lead and HCZ may lend resources and expertise. For example, in a partnership with traditional public elementary schools in the Harlem Children's Zone, HCZ provides, trains, and supervises AmeriCorps volunteers to assist teachers in the classrooms, run after-school and summer programming, and staff the playground and lunchroom.
- **Type 3:** HCZ leads the partnership or is a peer in a joint endeavor: When in the lead, HCZ drives the agenda and sets expectations while its partner(s) plays a supporting role. For instance, HCZ contracts with a dance group to provide movement instruction in its after-school program or with a non-profit that provides special education services to young children. In this model, HCZ holds control and can terminate the contract if performance is not satisfactory. In other partnerships where there is more of a peer relationship, both organizations share decision-making authority.

2. What are the ingredients of successful partnerships?

Working in partnership with one or more agencies is an art and a science. At their core, partnerships are built on trust and demand considerable flexibility — that’s the art. Building trust among partners can take months or even years and should not be glossed over as incidental.

At the same time, successful partnerships require management discipline, and this is the science. They are defined by agreements that spell out detailed responsibilities with budget implications for each partner. For instance, an agreement with a school might state which classrooms will be made available at what times and who will provide and pay for janitorial services; another agreement with a non-profit might stipulate who owns the intellectual property produced by the project and whether publications are to be jointly or singly authored.

Tips and Tools: Creating partnership agreements

Partnership agreements can take many forms; most common are interagency agreements, but they can also be contracts, memoranda of understanding, or letters of agreement. The exact format is less important than the content, which should clearly state the results sought, indicators of progress, as well as the activities, funding, and communication mechanisms that each party agrees to provide.

Partnership agreements should spell out who is responsible for specific areas of fundraising. It is important to avoid having two partners asking the same foundation or city agency for funding to do the same thing. Agreements should stipulate who will approach which funders and when two or more agencies will approach a funder together.

Another characteristic of successful partnerships is their ability to provide training and technical supports to their members so everyone has the skills necessary to fulfill their duties. For example, the White Center partnership, outside Seattle, dedicated considerable time and resources to educate its members on how the relevant public systems operate in the neighborhood. By investing time and resources in skills development, partnerships assure a level playing field and maximize the chances that everyone will be able to contribute effectively to the effort.

The Harlem Children’s Zone reports several keys to its successful partnerships, noting that it:

- closely monitors and manages all relationships in each partnership;
- maintains a transparent agenda;
- stays grounded in the data;
- identifies a clear chain of command, so partners know who has final say over which decisions; and
- acknowledges the strengths and expertise of each party.

3. How have communities developed partnerships for Promise Neighborhood-like work?

In a low-income neighborhood in the unincorporated portion of King County just outside Seattle, the White Center Community Development Association developed a resident-led partnership as part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Making Connections initiative. The group chose a partnership model over a single agency model because it felt it needed multiple organizations working together if it was to accomplish its ambitious agenda. Their steps were as follows:

- The partnership started when a group of resident leaders and organizational partners came together to agree on a vision for improving the community and a set of shared results that everyone wanted to see for children.
- The partnership also put forth a set of common values such as mutual respect, transparency, and equal voice, which allowed people to operate from a common vantage point.
- Over time, the partnership defined a management structure that governed how people would work together. Residents and committed leaders with decision-making authority from partner agencies and organizations shared decision-making and responsibilities for ensuring results and overseeing policy and funding. Deputies of the partner agencies were charged with working with residents to identify and implement new strategies designed to get better results. Next, a committee of top leaders oversaw the governance of the partnership; and finally, workgroups were slated to oversee particular program interventions.
- In addition to this decision-making and management structure, the partnership worked closely with leaders from different ethnic and language groups who had high credibility as community liaisons and brokers. Called “Trusted Advocates,” these people ensured that the partners had direct access to community voices on the frontlines, and vice versa.

The partnership put a premium on developing trust, creating joint decision-making and power-sharing rules, and intentionally developing opportunities for mutual learning. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation transitioned its role in the work, the community selected the White Center Community Development Association to become the “lead agency,” and the CDA continues to work to keep partners focused on their shared vision and desired results, build the capacity of members, manage communications among all parties, and build public will to expand and sustain the effort over time.

4. Should partnerships communicate their progress?

Community partnerships have often found it useful to report on their progress to the broader community. They use newsletters, report cards, conferences, websites, community fairs, press conferences, posters, briefing sheets, slide shows, videos, and more. Whatever the format, they share information about what has been accomplished and what they are still working on. They show data on results, sometimes as a trend line over time. If positive results are achieved, these reports help sustain community support beyond those directly involved in the work. If results are not positive after sufficient time has elapsed, it helps force the question: “What will we do differently going forward?”

5. How are partnerships with traditional public schools developed?

At the heart of each Promise Neighborhood is a good school. This requires a strong partnership between the school(s) and the lead agency, which, as described in the FY 2010 planning grant, is either a community organization or an institution of higher education. Partnerships with public schools often start from the outside, initiated by a community organization or city agency, but they can become a joint effort in which schools and other agencies have equal voices. Partnerships may be with the school district, individual principals, or both.

Two such partnerships — one in Providence, Rhode Island and the other, the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City — are presented here as examples.

Providence, Rhode Island, an Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections site, developed a partnership to improve outcomes for children in ways that are similar to Promise Neighborhoods. This is an example of an outside agency asking the school district to join a partnership on behalf of struggling students.

The Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet, which includes city departments, state agencies, and local community organizations asked the Superintendent of Providence Public Schools for greater clarity about his vision for working with community partners to address academic difficulties among students in the lowest performing schools and invited him to join their partnership. The superintendent agreed to look at performance data and consider what the school district could offer to such a partnership that would improve academic outcomes for these kids. He came back in two months with data and an agreement to become a member of the partnership, which included city departments, state agencies, and local community organizations.

In an intense two-month process involving senior school district leadership as well as city and community leaders, the school district created a framework for student success that called for more effective teachers and leaders, improved instruction, school-based supports for students, as well as family and community supports.

Based on this framework, partners in Providence are working together around a clear set of results: students enter school prepared to succeed; students successfully transition at different developmental levels; and students are ready to enroll in college or enter a career after graduation. These common outcomes were a useful organizing tool and allowed the group to identify even more specific indicators that helped determine whether particular interventions were working.

While it is too soon to report on outcomes, this promising effort is a good example of how one community forged a working partnership between the city, the school district, and the community to improve the life chances of low-income children.

The Harlem Children's Zone has formed partnerships with individual elementary schools as a way to reach large numbers of students and their families living in the Zone. They targeted principals of schools within the Children's Zone, not the whole New York City School District.

In one example, HCZ approached the principal of P.S. 197, an elementary school designated as failing (School Under Registration Review). After researching the needs at this school, HCZ staff offered the Peacemaker Program to the principal, Mr. Renardo Wright. The Peacemaker program offers trained AmeriCorps members to work in the school during the day, helping teachers in classrooms and staffing the playground and cafeteria time. Peacemakers also has an enrichment program after school, during some holidays, and summer. HCZ also offers several other programs such as Baby College and an Asthma Initiative to the traditional public schools.

HCZ approached Principal Wright by saying it wanted to be a resource to the school. At first, Wright was apprehensive, but he was soon convinced that HCZ wanted to support the school's goals. He was impressed that teachers were involved in the planning from the outset, discussions were open and candid, and there were no hidden agendas. Both HCZ and Principal Wright came to see the partnership as beneficial to students and to each organization. Teachers train HCZ staff on how to provide student literacy enrichment after school. Beyond helping in the classroom, HCZ sponsors community events aimed at improving student outcomes.

Since the partnership began, there has been rapid improvement in math and reading scores in grades 3, 4, and 5.

6. What can be done to sustain partnerships over time?

As we have seen, thoughtful upfront planning can mitigate potential problems later. But once the partnership is established, how do lead agencies keep their partners engaged and resolve problems that surface? A key is to constantly keep the mutual goals in front of members, so everyone is reminded that they are working toward the same ends. If one partner is not fulfilling responsibilities, a lead agency may want to identify the concern in a conversation rooted in data and discuss what needs to happen to improve results. The lead agency may also ask what it can do to help. This establishes an appropriate tone in a respectful partnership.

It is also important to take time to continually build trust among members. Lead agencies may want to get members working together in small groups on specific tasks so they can then interact more effectively in the larger group. This can be especially helpful when the partnership includes diverse interests and organizations.

This document summarizes examples and suggestions from the field on forming partnerships from:

Theresa Fujiwara, Strategy & Policy Advisor at the White Center Community Development Association and former Making Connections site liaison,
Arlene Lee, Associate Director, Center for the Study of Social Policy
Latasha Morgan, Director of After School Programs, Harlem Children's Zone
Kate Shoemaker, Director of Policy and Special Projects, Harlem Children's Zone
Erica Terrell, Program Director, Harlem Children's Zone
Anne Williams-Isom, Chief Operating Officer, Harlem Children's Zone

These presenters participated in a series of two webinars on partnerships hosted by the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink in January 2011. These webinars can be found at PromiseNeighborhoodsInstitute.org/Technical-Assistance/Webinars.

Additional Resources

For more information on how to establish and maintain partnerships in community initiatives, see the followings:

1. Kubisch, Anne C., Patricia Auspos, Prudence Brown, and Tom Dewar. 2010: *Voices From the Field III: Lessons and Challenges from Two Decades of Community Change Efforts*. Washington, D.C., Aspen Institute.
2. *Building Capacity for Local Decisionmaking: A Series of Learning Guides*, Center for the Study of Social Policy. These on-line tools describe efforts around the country to form local partnerships that are responsible for bringing about improved results for low-income children and families. They are available on-line at:
<http://www.cssp.org/publications/constituents-co-invested-in-change/community-decision-making/>

Learning Guide One: [Theory and Purpose of Local Decision Making](#)

Learning Guides Two: [Working With Members](#)

Learning Guides Three: [Setting a Community Agenda](#)

Learning Guides Four: [Strategies to Achieve Results](#) [See especially p.76-77 and p.137.]

Learning Guides Five: [Financing and Budgeting Strategies](#)

Learning Guides Six: [Using Data to Ensure Accountability](#) [See especially p.45]

3. *Four Keys to Collaboration Success*, Fieldstone Alliance. This resource emphasizes four of the 20 research-validated success factors in collaboration.
4. *How to “Nimble-ize” a Collaboration*, Fieldstone Alliance. This resource explores ways to make collaborations nimble and resilient and is especially useful for describing the role of a lead agency in keeping a collaborative effort on track.

¹ Department of Education, “Notice Inviting Applications,” Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 86 / Wednesday, May 5, 2010 / Notices, Page 24672.

² Department of Education, “Notice Inviting Applications,” Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 86 / Wednesday, May 5, 2010 / Notices, page 24683.