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School/Community Partnerships to Support Language Minority Student Success

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On their own, schools and families may not be able to support the academic success of every student (Kirst, 1991). In particular, language minority students, including immigrants and the U.S.-born children of immigrants, may not receive appropriate educational services due to a mismatch between the languages and cultures of the schools and those of their communities. To enhance support for these students, many schools have partnered with community-based organizations (CBOs)—groups committed to helping people obtain health, education, and other basic human services (Dryfoos, 1998). The programs they operate promise to assist students in ways that lie beyond the schools' traditional methods (Dryfoos, 1998; Heath & McLaughlin, 1991; Melaville, 1998). This research brief will provide some findings of a national study of school/CBO partnerships.

Researchers from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) collected descriptive data on partnerships that promote the academic achievement of language minority students. After a nomination process, 62 of 100 identified partnerships were selected to study. Thirty-one completed a survey and 17 of these partnerships were visited. Survey and site visit data indicate that the majority serve clients who are all or nearly all English language learners. One third of the 31 serve only Spanish speakers. The others serve multilingual populations in which speakers of Spanish are most numerous, followed by Vietnamese, Haitian Creole, Chinese languages, Lao, and Tongan. Typically, students are referred to the programs based on teachers' concerns, grade point average, testing results, limited English proficiency, attendance, or personal and family problems—but students also enroll voluntarily.

Three types of CBOs join with schools to support language minority students:

- Ethnic organizations. For example, the Filipino Community of Seattle partners with the Seattle Public Schools to operate the Filipino Youth Empowerment Project.
- CBOs whose only function is a school partnership. The Vaughn Family Center in Pacoima, CA was established to partner with one elementary school.
- Multi-purpose service organizations. The Chinatown Service Center operates the Castelar Healthy Start program at a Los Angeles elementary school with tutoring for students as well as health and other family services.

Most of these CBOs are nonprofit organizations.

Inside School/CBO Partnerships

School/CBO partnerships are highly variable in terms of who the partners are, how they relate to each other, and what contributions each brings. They may include one or more schools and one or more CBOs. Many partnerships responding to the survey also included colleges or universities (58%) and businesses (29%). Sometimes federal, state, and local government agencies provide funds or services–health, social, and other–at the program site. California's Healthy Start initiative funds programs that integrate the education, health, and social service systems for the benefit of children and families.

School/CBO partnerships tend to be fluid. Often, a single project brings organizations together, but over time, new partners offer new services and programs evolve. Groups may leave the partnership as funding runs out. Each partnership studied had a history of changing partners and/or programs. The dynamic nature of these partnerships allows them to take on new functions as needs and opportunities appear.

Relationships among partners vary (Crowson & Boyd, n.d.). Sometimes one organization hires program staff, and another provides funds and specialized resources. In 32% of the cases studied, the school led the partnership, and in 25%, a partner outside the school took the lead. In other partnerships, frequent contact—in regular meetings and informal interaction—allowed shared decision-making.

Partners bring a range of resources to the programs. Often schools refer students, and CBOs bring tutoring, health, and social services, community outreach, and mentoring. Other contributions come from both the schools and partners: staff, space, funding, political support, volunteers, program direction, evaluation, skills, training for students, access to the workplace, and transportation.

Functions of School/CBO Partnerships

The school/CBO partnership movement is far-reaching. It touches students of every age and fulfills a broad range of functions. At the preschool and elementary levels, programs offer a range of services to parents and families so that children are prepared for and supported through school. At the secondary level, programs often provide academic tutoring in the students' first language. The programs promote leadership skills and higher education goals, but they also address social factors that may interfere with student achievement (e.g., pregnancy, gang involvement).

School/CBO partnerships adapt to the schools' academic programs. Some partnerships lead full service schools with educational programs for students and families as well as comprehensive health and social services. Some operate alternative academic programs. Dade County (FL) Public Schools contracts with ASPIRA, an organization serving Latino youth, and with the Cuban-American National Council to run small, preventative middle schools for at-risk students. Other school/CBO programs augment the school's academic program. At the South Bronx High School in New York City, the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation runs a program for students having trouble with the academic demands of high school.

Program Success

School/CBO partnerships and programs that effectively help language minority students achieve school success are distinguished by adequate resources, partnership and program flexibility, responsiveness to the clients, and provisions for evaluation.

Resources. Although funding is a required resource for all programs, a central, defining element of successful programs is high quality staff. In each site visit, CREDE researchers met skilled and committed staff members who were very knowledgeable about their programs and the clients. Often their professional expertise was amplified by an affiliation with the client population, such as shared language and culture and similar immigration experiences.

One program in San Jose, CA employs immigrant women who have overcome many of the same social and educational challenges as the parents and children with whom they work. In addition to demonstrating how parents can support their children's school success and helping connect parents with teachers, these women serve as role models for clients with few contacts outside the immigrant community. Because they share clients' backgrounds and understand their experiences in and out of schools, staff develop trusting relationships with clients that promote program effectiveness. These relationships are more personal than typical teacher-student-family relationships, but they are similar in that program staff take an authoritative stance toward the client based on experience, cultural knowledge, and training.

Flexibility. Another defining attribute of successful school/CBO partnerships is structural and programmatic flexibility. The freedom to take on new partners and new programs enhances partnerships' responsiveness to clients.

Responsive Program Design. Successful partnerships offer appropriate programs that build on clients' needs (NCAS, 1994). Program designs respect clients' linguistic and cultural identity. Successful programs are also accessible both physically and psychologically. In other words, they operate where and when the clients need them and in ways that seem familiar. All of the programs studied show clients that school success is possible—clients can achieve.

Evaluation. Effective partnerships monitor their programs and use what they learn to improve their services. High quality programs have clear goals for their work and they record their progress in reaching them.

Conclusion

In their traditional configuration, schools cannot take on all of the work that is essential to supporting academic achievement. School partnerships with CBOs and other organizations help to broaden the base of support for language minority students. Partnerships support academic achievement not by "mimicking schools," (C. Collier, 1998) but by filling in and reinforcing the supports that schools often assume students already have. Broadly viewed, they focus on helping students achieve school success, a construct composed of behaviors such as understanding instruction, attending school regularly, taking leadership in the school and community, and more. Supporting school success may require tutoring in the student's first language or services that have traditionally been viewed as secondary to academic achievement, such as health care and advice on pregnancy prevention so that students can come to school, and parent education programs so that parents can help children with school work. The partnerships understand that these services are not secondary at all. Schools that act on this view can move toward more successfully retaining and educating language minority students who are at-risk.

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