

## EXPANDING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH COLLABORATION AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

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The Ohio Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement (OCCMSI) work in pilot schools has confirmed that school improvement efforts are complex, requiring attention to the multiplicity of factors influencing student achievement. This is because many students arrive at school with unmet needs and challenges that limit their ability to be successful (Adelman & Taylor, 1996). Comprehensive strategies are needed to address these non-academic barriers, allowing schools to gain control of the factors that often are outside the control of the regular school day. In general, five specific content areas guide the OCCMSI work, including programs and service strategies related to academic learning, youth development, parent/family engagement and support, health and social services, and community partnerships. The strengthening and creation of these various strategies occurs within the OCCMSI school improvement planning process. Needs and resources assessment, gap analysis, strategic planning and implementation, and evaluation/continuous improvement are critical components guiding the work. In order to manage these multiple pathways and processes, the OCCMSI and other expanded school improvement efforts require that multiple tasks, activities, and processes within the school and community happen simultaneously in systematic, coherent, and integrative ways. Collaboration and collaborative leadership structures are absolute necessities in allowing this process to occur.

### WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT COLLABORATION AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP?

Collaboration exists when individuals share information, integrate operations and activities, share resources and ownership of outcomes, and enhance each partner's capacities and strengths (Lawson, 2004; Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). Participating entities realize they are interdependent and understand that they cannot achieve their own missions and goals without the contributions others (Lawson, 2004). For these reasons, collaboration is characterized by lasting relationships; high

levels of a reciprocal investment, focus, trust, mutual commitment; and joint ownership of positive outcomes for students, schools, families, and communities.

The facilitation of collaboration requires new types of leadership styles and structures. Collaborative leadership structures distribute power, authority, and responsibility across groups and people by fostering shared commitments, resolving conflicts, facilitating lasting relationships, and stimulating effective action.

Collaborations also require new management and governance structures involving team approaches, rather than single person approaches. Team members collaborate and their organizations develop firm partnerships in support of new ways of doing business (Rubin, 2002). The research is clear: Significant benefits result from collaboration as multiple strategies and efforts are integrated and managed across multiple domains and systems simultaneously (Lawson, 2004; Mooney, Kline, & Davoren, 1999).

The OCCMSI is a collaborative endeavor sponsored by the Ohio Department of Education and implemented by the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University and the Department of Psychology and Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs at Miami University. For more information, please contact Dawn Anderson-Butcher (614-292-8596; anderson-butcher.1@osu.edu) and/or Diane Schneider-Farmer (614-466-9540; dianeschneider-farmer@ode.state.oh.us).

### Key Outcomes Associated with Collaboration

#### Improvements in:

- Academic achievement
- Attendance in school
- School climate
- Resource generation and the better utilization of them
- Service integration, coordination, and delivery

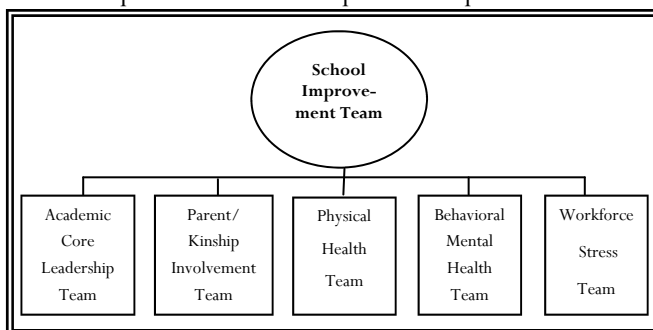
#### Reductions in:

- Problem behaviors
- School suspensions
- Duplication and fragmentation of programs and services
- Feelings of isolation among agencies and people

## ENHANCING COLLABORATION THROUGH THE OCCMSI

### CREATING MULTIPLE TEAM STRUCTURES

An effective collaboration strategy for focusing the work within OCCMSI pilot schools involves the formation of multiple teaming structures. Expanded school improvement teams are divided into core subgroups arranged according to targeted areas identified in the overall school improvement plan. Subgroups related to key barriers to learning or priority program/service areas are created (i.e., youth development, behavioral health, etc). These subgroups are comprised of key school- and community-based stakeholders with vested “self-interest” related to the priority area. For instance, a parent involvement team might be comprised of parents, a family liaison, a lead teacher, and a local community center representative. Together these stakeholders plan and implement high-impact, evidence-based strategies aimed to enhance parent involvement within the school. The work of this subgroup is then coordinated with the action plans and priorities of the other subgroups through their coordinated involvement in the overall expanded school improvement team. Relationships are built, resources are maximized, accountabilities are shared, and multiple strategies across multiple domains are parceled out to support a more comprehensive school improvement process.



### ASSIGNING LEAD RESPONSIBILITIES

The creation of subgroups provides a context for creating collaborative leadership structures that strive to integrate and maximize school- and community-based resources and services. One strategy for enhancing these structures is the assignment of lead responsibilities among people or agencies (Lawson, Barkdull, Anderson-Butcher, & Butcher, 1998). Collaborations must “piece out” and delegate the work needed to be completed by assigning “lead responsibility” to key people or organizations. Leadership for a given priority is given away, and the person or agency assigned the lead accepts the overall responsibilities for the work within the subgroup priority area. In the end, the school improvement team’s subgroups, as facilitated by the person or agency with lead responsibility, move forward with the work of the overall collaboration by developing and implementing strategies aimed to accomplish the desired expanded school improvement outcomes.

### THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES IN A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

In addition to the assignment of lead responsibilities, it also is important that collaborative teams and their members clearly understand their organization’s roles and responsibilities within the team. One essential role that is often overlooked within a collaboration is the role of an intermediary person or organization. Collaborations and partnerships involve committed relationships, and frequently the relationships needing to be built involve strangers and even former adversaries. Neutral parties are often needed to perform vital relationship-building, boundary-crossing, and agenda-setting functions. These neutral parties include both intermediary people (i.e., social workers and others who cross professional and organizational boundaries) and intermediary organizations (i.e., local non-profit organizations such as United Way; e.g., Lawson & Barkdull, 2001; Moore & Sandler, 2004). These intermediaries assume responsibility for cultivating awareness of interdependent relationships, developing equitable relationships, resolving conflicts, and facilitating resource sharing. All of these tasks are vital to the development and sustainability of collaborations and school-family-community partnerships.

### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Several lessons have been learned in relation to collaboration and collaborative leadership within the OCCMSI pilot sites:

- The creation of multiple subgroups that build from the overall school improvement team’s priorities allows for the school with its diverse representatives with personal or organizational interests in the established school improvement priorities and needs. Schools should be strategic when considering team members and composition.
- The assignment of lead responsibility among people and agencies is critical for ensuring oversight and accountability across collaborative leadership structures. Roles and responsibilities of those working within the collaboration should be clear. Intermediaries are often helpful in facilitating connections across groups, individuals, and institutions.