

# A Guide to Developing School-Family-Community Partnerships

The Center for Advancement of Mental Health Practices in Schools



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With increased academic accountability, created by the passage of No Child Left Behind, schools and districts are taking a closer look at student barriers impeding academic achievement. In many cases, these barriers are occurring “outside” the school walls, often coined non-academic barriers to learning, and include such barriers as family conflict, lack of parent engagement, mental health issues, and community violence. Schools and districts, however, oftentimes are unequipped to tackle these larger community and family issues alone. Educational leaders must look outside the school walls for support in addressing these student needs, as community-based resources such as youth development organizations, mental health agencies, and family support systems often can provide the needed support and interventions for students to target these non-academic barriers to learning. As such, school and district leaders must begin creating effective partnerships and linkages that support and enhance school and community resources in support of overall healthy development, academic achievement, and school success. This brief guide is intended to assist school and district leaders with the creation and development of these school-family-community partnerships and collaborations.

This guide is intended to help answer the following questions:

- What are school-family-community partnerships and why are they beneficial?
- How are school-family-community partnerships developed and maintained?
- What are the keys to sustaining and maintaining effective partnerships?
- How do you evaluate the overall effectiveness of a school-family-community partnership?

While this guide provides a synopsis of key strategies and suggestions, it is not intended to include all relevant information. However, after reading this document, you should have a general understanding of the importance of school-family-community partnerships and be aware of some first steps related to developing and enhancing these types of partnerships within your own school community.



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A partnership is the term used when two organizations partner together to provide a program and service. School-family-community partnerships, more specifically, include all types of formal and informal arrangements schools make with individuals, families, associations, private sector organizations, and/or public institutions to provide additional resources that support student learning. Some real-life examples include:

- A Boys & Girls Club operates an after-school program in the multipurpose room of the school. Students identified as in most need by teachers are recruited to the program. Academic support activities provided by Club staff are aligned with the curriculum in the school. An evidence-based life skills development program also is offered by the Club and targets students who display poor social skills.
- Local child welfare workers provide training for students and teachers on child abuse and neglect issues. They also operate a mutual support group for parents who are experiencing initial risk factors and stressors. Teachers at the school refer parents to the group when they notice families are struggling.
- Residents tackle community safety issues by providing cross-walk coverage in the area around the school before and after school. They also develop a neighborhood block watch program that promotes community safety and reduces crime.
- A mental health agency places two of its clinicians at the school. They provide individual counseling and therapy to students, as well as facilitate therapeutic groups designed to teach anger management and other social/life skills to targeted groups of students.
- A room in the building is designated as the parent resource center. Parents staff the room, providing other parents with support, direction, and connections to resources on an as-need basis. They also oversee the parent volunteer program at the school, recruiting parents and other volunteers to assist in classrooms, help with lunch duties, supervise recess, and help the school in various other capacities (i.e., make copies, mail letters, etc).



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- A school-based health clinic is developed at the school. A local pediatrician works there one day a week providing immunizations, screenings, and medical care. The Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program provides services through the clinic; and a local dentist provides dental care to students who are in need.
- The principal works with the CEO of a local business to establish a summer internship program for students expressing interest. In addition, employees of the business may opt to volunteer at the school for four hours of “company time” each month.

Potential partnerships are limited only by your imagination. Consider all of your community’s resources as potential mechanisms that may help your school succeed.

It may also help to remember that schools primarily are held accountable for students’ academic achievement. The responsibility for the healthy development of youth, however, is owned by all community stakeholders. As such, many partnerships may be grounded in the collective goals related to child well-being outcomes (which are in turn known to relate to academic outcomes). Specifically, many community agencies or organizations have goals and/or mission statements that are specifically focused on child well-being outcomes, including academic achievement.

The interconnection of both school and community goals creates the basis for building school-family-community partnerships. In other words, child well-being and academic outcomes cannot be achieved independent of one another; schools, families, and communities must work together to achieve the long-term outcomes of healthy development and success for all students. This new way of doing business promises to address heretofore unmet needs, including program and service gaps. As these needs are met, and as the gaps are bridged and filled, children, youth and families will benefit, and, in turn, school communities will see improved results.

More specifically, effective partnerships have been shown to contribute to enhanced student outcomes such as increased academic achievement, student



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attendance, graduation rates, and social and emotional development. They have resulted in enhanced safety and school climate, increased opportunities for pro-social involvement, and increased parent and family engagement. School and community resources have been maximized and services have been better integrated and accessed. And some have also noted considerable impacts in relation to overall community commitment and buy-in, as noted through the passage of school levies, enhanced community trust of the schools, and increased resource allocations.

Remember though, partnerships are not automatically beneficial. Some will yield more benefits than others. You'll want to ensure that your partnerships improve the intended outcomes you desire for your school community. In other words, it is essential that your partnerships help you (i.e., the school) gain more influence over students' out-of-school time. They also are needed so that your school may ultimately better address the most salient individual, peer, family, and community factors (i.e., non-academic barriers to learning) known to constrain and prevent your students' success. Careful attention, thus, should be paid to how and when you should develop and maintain them.



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Oftentimes, it is easy to see the benefits of school-family-community partnerships. One may wonder, however, how a school or district actually develops and maintains these relationships. The following section aims to answer this question by outlining six possible steps for building school-family-community partnerships. The steps are intended to provide a framework when beginning to engage in partnership discussions and joint planning efforts among schools and community agencies.

### *Step 1: Examine school and community goals, priorities, and expectations*

Initially, school, district, and other community leaders will need to make important decisions about the kinds of partnerships wanted and needed that will ultimately enhance the developmental and academic outcomes for youth in the community. To begin this process, one first helpful step is to rally a group of school and community leaders together and ‘build a table’ (i.e., a group of people who are focused on these common goals). This ‘table’ then might begin mapping key school and community outcomes and create shared buy-in and ownership for solutions. Together, a common vision and mission, complemented by strategic goals and action steps for the group, may be created and defined.

For instance, some schools begin convening discussions about what they aspire to accomplish through the ‘table’ discussion. They describe visions of collective strategies designed to ensure positive youth development and academic success. Examples of broader goals might include “all youth succeed in school”; or “all youth choose healthy behaviors”. They may even be more specific and reflect something like “all youth graduate from high schools with the necessary knowledge base and skills needed to succeed post-graduation.”

Regardless of the focus, hopes for desirable achievement outcomes are identified collectively by the ‘table.’ Individual partnership members begin focusing their attention on this broader goal and priority, and new and/or enhanced relationships are created that foster synergy and shared responsibility. Within this process, it is crucial that the goals of the group are mutually-beneficial for all engaged; and all members at the ‘table’ see their role in supporting the work towards the desired broader outcome. If one member of the group cannot see the



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benefit for their organization or school, in most cases this member will leave the group.

Schools and districts often already have existent leadership teams and structures in place that will provide a good launching place for the development of this expanded 'table.' Key leaders on these local school improvement teams often include the principal, lead teachers from each grade level, the special education teacher, and other support staff (i.e., school counselor or social worker, etc). Additional partners may be added to this already existent team, or another 'table' may be created that works in connection with this already existent academically-focused team.

Regardless, once the group has outlined its intended goals, priorities, and expectations, discussions may then center on the action steps the group will take in order to begin working towards this ultimate vision. The first step will be to begin looking at the current context of the school community, including the needs and barriers that may impede the group from achieving its overall goal.

### *Step 2: Assess needs and barriers to accomplishing goals*

Oftentimes, assessments of conditions and needs are typically ignored and neglected during planning processes and even when attempted, are not completed in a thorough and comprehensive manner. Completing a needs assessment, however, is crucial to ensuring the priority needs of the school community are met. A complete needs assessment aids in aligning and maximizing resources to specifically target the specific identified needs. A needs assessment enables a school community to:

- Identify where (e.g., school, neighborhood, family, etc.) conditions and needs are the most prevalent;
- Identify important groups requiring special attention, groups you will call "target populations;"
- Learn more about established conditions and uncover new conditions;



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- Identify barriers that may be preventing learning and academic achievement and keeping youth and families away from needed programs and services (Chinman, et al., 2004; Ohio Department of Mental Health, 1983)

Needs assessments should examine all conditions related to youth, families, schools and the community. An eye should be made toward the examination of the barriers these conditions present to optimal learning, academic achievement, and healthy youth development.

To assess needs, it is often necessary to compile secondary data sources. These data sources may include school academic performance and behavioral (i.e., disciplines, attendance) data, child welfare statistics, census data, public health and safety data, and local economic data. In addition to collecting these secondary data, it is often also beneficial to collect primary data through community surveys, focus groups, and/or key informant interviews. These additional data collection strategies often assist with “telling the story” behind the quantitative data. For example, in terms of discipline data, you can learn more about why, when, and how students are acting out. This information will help you further understand what the underlying issues are so that you may better design strategies to address them.

Completing a thorough needs assessment can be a tedious but worthwhile process. For additional information about completing a needs assessment, please refer to the Implementation Guide for the Ohio Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement which can be found at: [http://www.csw.ohio-state.edu/occmcsi/OCCMSI\\_ImplementationGuide.html](http://www.csw.ohio-state.edu/occmcsi/OCCMSI_ImplementationGuide.html). You might also examine Chinman, Imm, and Wandersman (2004); Samuels, Ahsan, and Garcia (1995); Witkin and Altschuld (1995); and Kretzmann and McKnight (1993).

### *Step 3: Map school and community resources*

Once a needs assessment has been completed, the next step is to begin to look at what resources are already available within the community. Resources encompass financial, human, and political assets (especially community and family resources) that are existent in the school community, many of which are





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often untapped or under-utilized. Key resources might include: youth- and family-serving neighborhood organizations, colleges and universities, adult education organizations, faith-based organizations, social and health service organizations, businesses and corporations, and individuals, parents, families, and local resident leaders.

After identifying the multitude of school and community resources, it might be helpful to ask a number of key questions about each one. Samuels et. al. (1995) suggests asking the following questions when completing a resource mapping:

- Who does the resource serve (i.e., gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status)?
- What services do they provide?
- How many youth/families do they serve?
- When and where are these services provided?
- What geographic areas do they serve?
- What is the composition of the staff, including gender, ethnicity, education, and training?
- What are the eligibility requirements for services?
- What is the cost of services for those served?
- What is the provider's maximum capacity?

Mapping these resources, and answering these specific questions about each one, allows the 'table' to begin thinking through the many strengths that exist in the school and community.

After completing this resource mapping (and the needs assessment), the next step might be to take a closer look at any gaps in services that may be present. This step is often termed a gap analysis.



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### *Step 4: Identify gaps through a gap analysis*

A gap analysis, or the comparison of needs and resources, helps to produce directions essential for future planning and organizing. The process allows gaps to be determined where there are not enough resources available to fulfill given needs. When completing the gap analysis, there are five common discoveries that often are found within communities:

- There is just the right match between the conditions and needs of schools, youth, families (i.e., the optimal scenario);
- There is just the right match between the conditions and needs of schools, youth and families and community resources available to meet those needs; the main problem is they are not connected in a coherent, effective and systematic way;
- There are not enough of the right kinds of programs and services to meet school, youth and family conditions;
- There are enough programs and services; the main problem is they are fragmented and duplicative; and/or
- There are too many programs and services available in relation to actual use; the main problem is in getting people in need to start using the available programs and services.

Dependent on the discoveries you make, a variety of next steps may be necessary in an effort to ensure needs are being adequately met by the various school and community resources. Possible next steps include:

- Facilitate a discussion about how to re-deploy resources to address priority gaps
- Cut back on a particular programs or services that are not specifically tied to priority areas and needs;



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- Improve the quality or implementation fidelity of current programs and services;
- Convene stakeholders to assist in integrating services, prevent fragmentation, duplication and unnecessary competition, and maximize resources;
- Develop mechanisms to ensure that those in need are linked with the appropriate resources through effective linkage and referral mechanisms; and/or
- Develop, enhance, or support the use of connective mechanisms and/or organizations (often called intermediaries) that bring people and agencies together to collectively address the gaps.

In most cases, the next step could also involve finding additional community partners who may not have initially been involved in the discussion, but who might help provide needed resources. For the purposes of this partnership guide, it will be assumed that additional partners need to be found to address identified gaps. This is the next step in the development of school-family-community partnership process.

*Step 5: Seek out additional partners who will meet identified gaps*

When first beginning to build and expand partnerships to address identified gaps, there are three key questions that are helpful in driving decisions around engaging additional partners. They include:

- Which family and community entities enable you to address the needs and gaps identified in your assessments?
- Which family and community entities offer the greatest potential contributions to improving the identified needs of the community, including academic learning and achievement?
- What kinds of strategic relationships does the ‘community table’ want and/or need to establish with each entity?



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Table 1 outlines other key strategies that may be helpful when recruiting and retaining these new partners.

**Table 1. Strategies for Recruiting & Retaining Partnerships**

- Find common ground that allows each person and organization to participate, while recognizing each other's varied accountabilities
- Identify benefits of partnerships; and costs and losses of dropping out
- Find ways for each person and entity to get their goals met through the partnership
- Find ways for each person and entity to have a niche to excel and ways to share in the accountability
- Regularly develop and disseminate fact sheets that announce the partnership's aims and accomplishments
- Make participation a welcome part of the climate and culture; hospitality will be contagious; persons will want to help you
- Help partners convince their top level leaders that their partnership with you is worth the effort and part of the job
- Establish interdependent relationships among members
- Be aware of persons and groups that are not at the table who need to be; and develop recruitment strategies to engage these entities.
- Understand and identify clichés; dismantling false boundaries and stigmatizing in the community can help youth and children do the same
- Host "open houses" and informal times of hospitality to build effective bridges; there needs to be time together, without heavy agenda or motive
- Sponsor informal events that build friendships
- Ensure the "right mix" is invited, drawing on histories of success and failure
- Employ "community guides" who can translate the mission, best practices and interests of the entire community
- Identify neutral people and organizations to convene potential partners



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You'll also want to think through some additional questions when determining potential partners.

- Does a partnership with this person or organization promise to improve learning, academic achievement and success in school?
- What do you stand to gain by partnering? To lose? Are the benefits worth it?
- Does it have a good reputation? Is it credible?
- Does the prospective partner have a clear, compelling mission and concrete, attainable goals? Are you willing to have its reputation affect your reputation?
- Does it have a set of operating principles and values that guide its work? Are these principles, values and goals, and this mission consistent with yours?
- Does the prospective partner have enough resources to accomplish its mission?
- Is the prospective partner known for sharing resources and, all in all, cooperating and collaborating with others? Will you share resources with it?
- Is the prospective partner dependable and trustworthy?
- Does it have local competitors? If so, how will you choose among them? Will you lose other partners if you partner with this organization? If so, is it worth it?
- Can the potential partner recruit, serve, and retain other populations, especially the ones you can not serve?
- Does the prospective partner endorse your vision? If not, can the partner be convinced to "buy in" to this vision?



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All additional partners, recruited to fulfill gaps, should also be made aware of the intended outcomes expected as well as the focus of the program to be produced through the partnership (i.e., results- or activity-oriented). Additionally, new community partners should be fully integrated into the planning process and value the overall mission and goals of the ‘table.’

While recruiting additional partners is a task in itself, maintaining partnerships is often then most difficult part in this entire process. There are many barriers and challenges that come with partnership development, as overviewed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Common Barriers to Retaining Partners**

Some of the largest barriers to retaining partners include:

- Interdependent relationships and collaboration are not valued
- Norms for quality interaction have not been established
- Sharing is not a priority
- Perception that it is easier to do work alone
- People and agencies are inadvertently left out
- “Gifts” are left untapped
- Informal opportunities to get to know one another and continuously bring in new resources are not often available
- There is limited time and resources to devote to building partnerships
- Individuals and agencies do not see partnerships as central to their work and success



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Many of these barriers and challenges may be nullified if attention is paid to the development of a strategic collaborative leadership infrastructure that supports the work of the partnership. As such, you'll also want to strategically think through how you will manage and oversee your various school-family-community partnerships.

### *Step 6: Develop an infrastructure to maintain partnerships*

Each school community will need to develop an organizational structure that best serves their individual needs. One essential component of the infrastructure is the creation of a leadership group which drives the work of the 'table.' This group often is comprised of key school and community leaders such as the principal, Executive Director of the local non-profit organization, the mayor, and/or the parent-teacher organization president. One of these individuals, typically the school principal, serves as the chair of the group.

This small leadership group provides the overall vision for a broader school-family-community partnership, sometimes called a Consortium or Collaborative, which is comprised of the many individuals who represent each of the diverse organizations and entities involved in the collaborative work.

It is often helpful to divide the work of this broader partnership into core subgroups, or teams that are arranged according to targeted areas identified in the gap analysis process. The actual "work" of the school-family-community partnership will take place in these subgroup settings.

More specifically, the particular focus of the various subgroups is determined locally through the school-family-community partnership work. For instance, local school communities may decide to organize the subgroups by practice areas (i.e., youth development, behavioral health, parent/family, etc). Others may decide to structure their partnership by targeted outcomes or needs areas (i.e., substance use and abuse, teenage pregnancy, child abuse and neglect, etc).

These subgroups will then be comprised of key school- and community-based stakeholders with vested "self-interests" related to each priority area. For instance, a parent/kinship involvement team might be comprised of parents, a

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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 community. 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 'table.' Relationships are built, resources are maximized, accountabilities are shared, and multiple strategies across multiple domains are parceled out to support a more comprehensive community improvement process. Figure 1 presents an example of a school community table's potential organizational structure.

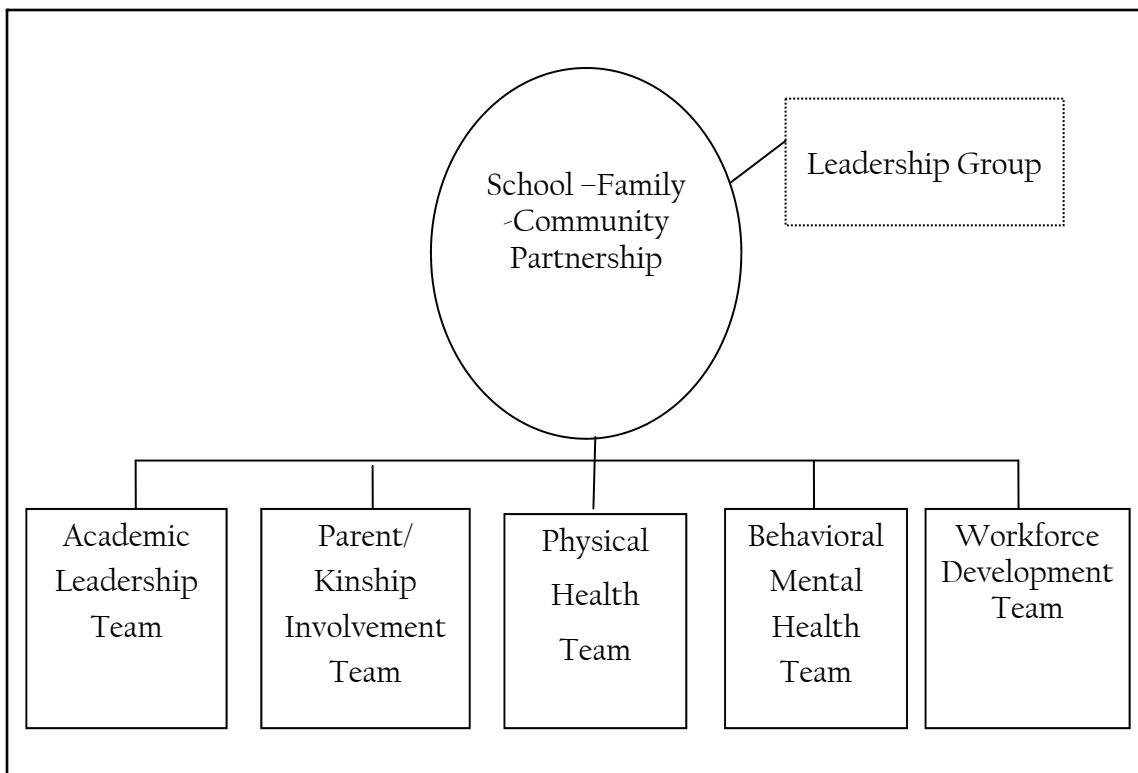


Figure 1. Example Community Table Organizational Structure

By creating these subgroups or teams focused on specific needs, partners might be better able to see how they connect and impact the overall needs of the school community. It is also possible that this infrastructure might aid in creating joint buy-in, as every partner will be able to achieve its own missions, goals, and accountabilities while at the same time see their own contribution to the achievement of the overall school community's vision, mission, goals, and





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accountabilities. In this fundamental sense, partnerships are mutually beneficial. They individually benefit from their involvement, while the partnership at large (and its other members) also benefit.

With time and especially with facilitation, partners will eventually learn they depend on each other (i.e., that no partner can achieve what it wants to without the others). The success of one entity will contribute to the success of the others. The development of this mutual awareness of interdependent relationships is key to sustaining effective school-family-community partnerships. Two additional strategies will also assist in moving the partnership to action: the assignment of lead responsibilities and the use of intermediaries.

The assignment of lead responsibilities derives from this fundamental need: No school or agency can be “all things to all people” and, in essence, “do it all, alone.” The partnership must “piece out” and delegate the work needing to be done by assigning people and organizations “lead responsibility” – meaning they will take the lead in getting the work done. These “leads” facilitate the action strategies of each subgroup, but also report regularly to the leadership team and larger partnership on the activities, goals, and next steps within the subgroup. These subgroups, as directed by the person or agency with lead responsibility, move forward with the work of the collaboration by developing and implementing programs and services aimed to address identified gaps and needs within the school community.

The use of intermediary people (i.e., social workers and others who cross professional and organizational boundaries) and intermediary organizations (i.e., the local United Way or local non-profit organizations) often are needed to facilitate the partnerships. Intermediaries perform important relationship-building, boundary-crossing, and agenda-setting functions in support of the partnership or subgroup. They are also charged with resolving conflicts, facilitating resource sharing, and doing the “behind the scenes work” associated with developing and sustaining partnerships.

The use of an intermediary organization to facilitate the process work of the partnership also allows the school to stay focused on its primary mission, goals



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and accountabilities. The work of the partners in response to identified needs is then overseen by this neutral entity that can bridge the out-of-school time and barriers to learning work with that of the school.

As part of the process of developing partnerships, key priorities, needs, and intended outcomes are identified. Strategic partnerships are then made to help ensure that resources are available to impact the identified need. Oftentimes, this is where the process ends. However, it is crucial to evaluate the overall effectiveness of school-family-community partnerships in an effort to ensure that all partnerships and resources are in fact having their intended impact.

The following checklist highlights some core ‘building blocks’ of a comprehensive evaluation in relation to evaluating school-family-community partnerships. Attention to each of these essential tasks and activities may assist you in building an evaluation and accountability capacity for the overall system.

- We have developed a *clear and consistent* partnership infrastructure and have committed to its implementation
- We have *integrated* our school community ‘table’ with other relevant school frameworks (i.e., school improvement plan, wellness policy, etc.)
- We have developed a *leadership structure* with appropriate leadership teams in place
- We have a ‘*teaming*’ structure in place that organizes and coordinates partnerships at all levels of the system (i.e., mental health team, workforce development team, physical health team, etc.)
- We have a *needs assessment measurement system* in place that allows us to assess and monitor critical family and students needs that might be addressed by the community table



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- ❑ We have developed a *school and community resource inventory* that enables us to map critical programs and services at all levels (i.e., prevention/promotion, early intervention, intervention/treatment); and allows us to explore gaps in programs and services that need to be addressed
- ❑ We have in place *strategic partnerships* that enable us to provide critical services to students at all levels (i.e., prevention/promotion, early intervention, intervention/treatment)
- ❑ We have identified *prevention/promotion, early intervention, and treatment strategies* consistent with student needs
- ❑ We have developed a *process* for our school community that effectively defines the roles and responsibilities of, as well as connections among, individuals, teaming structures, programs and strategies present within the community table
- ❑ We have an evaluation/measurement system in place that is designed to:
  - Measure and monitor the *effort* of improvement strategies at all levels of the service continuum
  - Measure and monitor the *quality* of improvement support strategies at all levels of the service continuum
  - Measure and monitor the *impact* of improvement support strategies at all levels of the service continuum

By having these evaluation components in place, you can ensure that your partnership is working toward accomplishing its desired intent. You'll want to make sure you have an evaluation system in place that tracks progress towards and completion of these "building blocks."

As you systematically and regularly pay attention to these points, you'll be able to create continuous improvements and enhancements within your overall



## CONCLUSION

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school-family-community partnership agenda.

As you continue to learn more about school-family-community partnership building, it will be important for you to never lose sight of the bottom line, which is to help children and youth succeed. Through partnership development, school and communities together can build the necessary processes and practices that will ensure that students' most pressing needs are identified and met.

You have made a great first step in the right direction to help the youth and community in which you are involved, just by reading through this basic framework. We hope the next steps you take will lead you deeper into the process of building successful school-family-community partnerships, so that the students you assist today have the resources and opportunities to become tomorrow's bright future.

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