



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Create a mutual admiration society

BY JIM PATERSON

Joe Roy had just found out he'd been named Superintendent of the Year in Pennsylvania, but on a bleak winter morning in Bethlehem, PA, that wasn't the situation that was warming him up. He was on fire for another issue that inspires him: community engagement.

It's a topic that can make some administrators grit their teeth—knowing it's yet another requirement on their jam-packed agenda—and make others sigh, thinking little more can be done beyond the traditional, mandatory efforts. But Roy thinks it's exciting and should be a top priority for educators.

"I was a high school principal for about 15 years, and it is still near and dear to my heart, and I think this is critical," he says. "Principals, working with district leadership, must make

community partnership a priority. It brings needed resources to our students and families."

On the district's website, the message is clear. In a mission statement positioned prominently at the top right corner of the homepage, it begins: "The Bethlehem Area School District, in partnership with the home and community ..."

Roy's schools are in the center of the Lehigh Valley, comprising roughly four counties an hour north of Philadelphia and 90 minutes west of New York City. Families in his district of 14,000 students once relied heavily on the Bethlehem Steel Company, the second-largest steel factory in the country.

About 20 years ago, the huge plant faltered and went silent. At the same time, leaders in the region, with United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley (UWGLV) in the lead, were forging something new—they were working together to



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boost support for students and schools in the area.

The region’s economy has bounced back, local officials say, and that unique work by educators and community leaders set the right tone and has helped schools thrive. Roy points to a series of ways he and other area educators have worked with community leaders to provide services to students. At his schools, it ranges from sports medicine for teams through local health care specialists or arts support by local groups to teacher grants from a foundation supporting the schools and full scholarships from area colleges for its best students.

And UWGLV and other groups forming a community schools partnership continue to help students in the region—providing support for everything from reading readiness, mentoring, summer learning, to health and mental health services, and family activities. The work is accomplished with more than 20 school-based community-school coordinators funded through a combined effort, according to Jill Pereira, UWGLV senior director for education.

“It’s about working together differently to meet the needs of kids to produce better outcomes,” she says, adding extra praise for Roy. “This work requires leaders from all sectors who persevere, are passionate, humble, strategic, and action-oriented.”

Early Alignment

Lehigh Valley is unique in having this atmosphere established early where such partnerships benefit schools—along with commitments from organizations such as United Way and administrators such as Roy, who says the work starts with principals laying the groundwork.

Principals should “make sure there is a clear understanding of the partner’s contribution and how it aligns with the school’s goals. ... Alignment is key,” Roy notes. “It’s even OK to say ‘no’ or ‘not now’ to a partner if the fit is not right.”

Principals should determine their needs and clearly think through how community leaders can help, agrees Jamie Vollmer, a former businessman who has made community involvement in schools his cause. Vollmer, the author of the book *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*, offers clear steps for administrators in their work with community leaders.

Vollmer says initial moves should include a formal “mapping” of available resources, where principals explore options using all their connections to the community through their staff, the district, and other administrators.

“A lot of schools have partners. Far fewer schools have a plan where the community supports the goals of the schools,” says Martin Blank, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) and director of the Coalition for Community Schools. “It can’t be

piecemeal. They need to know the potential partners, know how they might help their school, and get them all together and see how they can become integral to the life and the work of the school consistently.”

The Winston-Salem Foundation in North Carolina, for example, has been a major supporter of local schools with a variety of targeted support, including a five-year, \$2.3 million fund specifically earmarked for staff development, which local schools recommended as the money became available. In connection with the foundation, Branch Banking and Trust Company (BB&T) regionally offered a free leadership training program for principals once the desire for management training was recognized, says foundation President Scott Wierman. The foundation also recently provided nearly \$75,000 in grants to 41 teachers for ideas they developed and gave almost \$1 million in scholarships to students—another school priority.

Wierman says if schools make a clear case for their needs, the community will respond, knowing the schools can also then benefit the region—a point he says principals should make when they seek support.

“We have principals in our school system who have an appetite for forming community partnerships, essentially with the idea that the school-house also becomes the center of the

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community,” he says. “They investigate the community’s challenges and work with the community to solve them.”

Many Messengers

Pereira says community leaders want to see a “clear vision and goals articulated for the school long-term and in each school year.” She and other experts agree it starts with communication.

“Network, network, network,” she says, adding that principals should keep an open mind about opportunities. “Don’t look at companies as just a means of funding, but rather as sources of time, expertise, and people, and work them into your plan.”

For instance, the Tukwila School District in Washington state uses trainers to work with athletes to prevent injury and improve fitness, thanks to a grant from the Seattle Seahawks and the National Football League.

Vollmer says a school or district should have a “brand” that tells what it is about and what it is trying to do, along with a well-conceived “script” offering a short, succinct message. Then, he says, it needs messengers—a key part of his “informal track” for principals to follow in community engagement, where he says principals can make everyone in the school its ambassadors with a consistent, positive message.

“Teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, administrators, and board members also must stop bad-mouthing one another and their schools in public,”

he writes. “This destructive behavior is pervasive, and it is the epitome of lose-lose behavior: It undermines the reputation of the speaker while simultaneously grinding down the public’s opinion of their local schools.”

Often, experts say, good partnerships start from the bottom up with staff or parents—even some students—and principals should educate them all about the school’s needs, encourage them to make connections, and ask them to keep administrators informed about opportunities.

“For all sorts of reasons, we want to front-end load what is going on positively in our schools,” Vollmer says, recalling one principal who began collecting “everyday evidence” of success from students, teachers, and parents, publicizing it and sending it to policymakers—from local officials to the governor. The contributions grew, as did the attention the weekly notes got from all recipients. “He branded his school throughout the community from right within its walls with his own information. You can’t buy that kind of shift in tone.”

IEL’s Blank notes that while it’s important to appeal to the sense of duty among community leaders and taxpayers, it’s equally important to remind them that research repeatedly shows good schools lead to lower crime, improved health, elevated property values, trained workers, and a boosted regional economy.

“Enlightened community leaders recognize and make a commitment to the connection between civic quality of life, economic growth, and the quality of the local school district,” says Jeremy Lyon, superintendent of Frisco Independent School District in Texas, who manages one of the fastest-growing districts in the country. “These three prongs—civic quality, economic growth, and school quality—define successful communities. This spurs progress on all fronts.”

Home Field

When making these connections, it is important to “go to their turf,” says Nancy Coogan, a former principal and now superintendent of Tukwila School District just south of Seattle, which has embraced a booming immigrant population. Coogan spends time at a local diner and frequents a large prayer meeting for the Muslim community looking for creative ways to connect to the community; she also asks her staff to do the same.

It pays off with school partnerships, including a seminar that brought together local businesses to discuss STEM offerings at the school. In another effort, arts and music programs coordinated with local colleges and organizations. In another partnership, a much-heralded Young Executives of Color group gives a dozen students college-level



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coursework, business mentors, and real-world experience.

“We are champions of our students, and when community leaders recognize what we are trying to do and what our students offer, they get involved,” says Coogan, who believes school administrators have to seek “win-win situations” and be creative, looking beyond the traditional efforts that schools and communities make.

Ideas for those situations often come out of a regular meeting with community businesses, political leaders, and principals that Coogan helps facilitate, where she and administrators listen carefully and promote ideas that benefit their students and the community. “For some, it is positive media coverage,” Pereira says. “For others, it is a way for their employees to feel good about getting involved and giving back; for others, it’s tied to a specific point on a strategic plan.”

Coogan says that principals have to be willing to listen to new ideas, but she is concerned that worries about performance and test results get in the way of administrators putting their best foot forward.

“They are often fearful of not making the grade with standardized tests,” she says. “We appreciate principals who carry a spark for kids and for building teams of teachers who explore new ways to bring learning to life—teachers who are passionate

about creative ways for it to happen. We want to work with educators who are secure understanding the value of that sort of creativity.”

Structure Matters

Experts say persistence—and structures—are required to keep such partnerships alive, since principals move on, agency budgets get trimmed, and managers at a local business may be promoted.

Paige Whalen is the program manager for the Center for Community School Strategies (CCSS) in Tulsa, OK, an organization formed from a community schools effort by principals and local leaders about 20 years ago. The CCSS has grown to assist schools in four districts and has become a statewide resource with a staff of 11. Whalen says having a community-school coordinator is key.

That person, sometimes at the district level but often within the school, can provide continuity and support to a busy principal in several ways—working with the staff, students, parents, and community leaders to make the connection stick. She says the coordinator must promote communications in both directions. “The coordinator is truly a cornerstone of this model, and he or she has a role as important as the principal’s—as a leader who believes in shared ownership of the school.”

Whalen notes that family engagement can be done in a “meaningful and intentional manner,” with such a person available to “address barriers children and families might have for achieving academic success” and work with partners to assist. “They have to always ask, ‘How does this help the child be successful—socially, emotionally, and academically?’ to keep the goal in sight,” she says.

Whalen also says that school and district approaches must be coordinated and communicated, so they aren’t at odds or duplicating efforts. “District-level, well-intentioned policies can create barriers for principals, coordinators, teachers, and families/children. The district and school must have clear, open communications to address these and make changes if needed,” she explains.

At the other end, Whalen also notes that principals must believe in shared leadership. “They have to share responsibility with anyone and everyone, from children and families to coordinators and teachers and staff—and community partners,” she says. “As principals build the ability to share the ownership of the school, they build their capacity to bring on other partners and build trust. At the end of the day, it will always be about relationships.”

Jim Paterson is a writer based in Lewes, DE.

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS

Consider these opportunities where principals can develop connections with community leaders:

Staff support. The Winston-Salem Foundation in North Carolina and other donors at the schools' request offered teacher professional development funding and free principal training. Other community partnerships have created everything from mindfulness seminars for staff to free health screenings.

The arts. Tukwila School District in Washington state partners with local art and music groups and area colleges. In Silver Spring, MD, a community partnership through Arts on the Block has created more than 100 public pieces of art, thanks to local students. Local theaters can help student actors get experience on a public stage or give student theater groups access to their sets and equipment.

Sports. Frisco School District in Texas has a unique multimillion-dollar arrangement with the Dallas Cowboys and other local professional teams to use professional facilities. Other schools coordinate efforts with local colleges for support, and there are a host of fundraising sponsorship opportunities for businesses at arenas—from elaborate scoreboards to seat cushions.

Mental health. Services can range from a therapist visiting weekly to help with more critical student issues than busy counselors can handle, to information sessions for students and parents about emotional issues.

Health. Schools can have the local health community provide services on site, such as health fairs for students and their families.

Mentoring or internships. A popular win-win program—students get real-world experience working, and local organizations get good help with new ideas and potentially well-vetted employees down the road. Even shadowing for a day pays off.

Law enforcement. Connections here can improve understanding and relationships—and provide students with good information about the law and the dangers crime carries.

Academics. The United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania helps some struggling schools in its region improve reading scores. In fact, there are a lot of creative ways the community can be involved in academics, from a CPA firm helping with math to local historical societies adding life to a social studies class. Local organizations also can help develop or enhance curricula in their areas of expertise.

Technology. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is perhaps the best-known example, but a number of tech-related companies have assisted schools with upgrades to technology and provided teaching assistance. Often, they also get good feedback and cutting-edge ideas from students.

Extra room. Businesses and other groups may have extra space that isn't being used, including storefronts, display racks, or bulletin boards to promote a school or fields where sports teams can practice when seasons overlap.

Other services. From hot dogs at the football game to massages for the teacher of the month, local businesses are almost always willing to help out by donating goods or services, sometimes just in exchange for an ad in a program or on a tabletop.

Communications. Ask local newspapers or television stations to regularly help get the message out; consider involving journalism students to round out the experience.

Outdoors. Work with local parks or other public spaces where students can spend time in addition to learning about landscaping or horticulture (or get community service hours by cleaning them up!).