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Playbook

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



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A Playbook for Building School-Community Partnerships to Support Children and Families

Why focus on prenatal through 3rd grade?

The earliest years of a child's development are the years of the greatest potential. During this time children's learning and development is rapid and vulnerable to experiences—positive experiences promote learning and development while negative experiences may hinder it.

Research is clear that during these years, young children thrive in supportive environments. At the center of these environments are the people that surround the child—family, friends, teachers, doctors and more and the relationships they build. Children do best when these are warm, loving, and responsive. Children's environments also include their physical surroundings, including the things they see, hear, touch, taste and smell. From the language(s) they hear, the food they eat, to the air they breathe, everything around young children can affect their learning and development.

Focusing on these earliest years recognizes their profound power in shaping children's lives to come. So many of the forces driving children's learning and development occur during this time that it can be hard to see how interconnected they are, and how important it is for the adults around children to intentionally build environments and experiences to support them across these years.

What the Research Says

Children's brains grow rapidly, making more connections than any other period of development. From birth to 3, children's brains can make up to 1 million new connections per second.

Children's early experiences determine which connections grow stronger and which are lost. Through this process, their earliest experiences shape the brain's physical development.

These experiences come from the people, places, languages, and traditions that surround children.

Children build their brains in the context of supportive, responsive relationships.

From *[Supporting Early Brain Development: Building the Brain](#)*
Head Start National Center on Development, Teaching and Learning

“It may take a village to raise a child, but the raising of that child also benefits the village.”

Elliot Haspel—Raising a Nation

Why this playbook?

Creating deep school-community partnerships is one way to support families in many of the places they spend their lives. Families and children visit community organizations like libraries and community centers; they attend church; they participate in athletic leagues and clubs; they attend child care programs and summer camps; children enroll in school. These partnerships what among organizations in communities harness what each does best and aligns them under common purpose, often collaborating on collections of activities that enhance the reach of partners individually. Yet forming these partnerships can be challenging. Different organizations operate under different sets of policies and procedures that need to be accommodated when collaborating. Collaboration may be new to partners, and they may lack the experience to know where to begin.

How to use this playbook

This playbook has been prepared to help community teams work systematically towards defining a common goal that can help intentionally plan activities that meet the needs of local families and children. It is designed to provide space for collaborative planning and implementation of activities across the community to support young children and their families. The approach and tools presented here are intended to provide jumping off points, neither restrictive nor prescriptive. The playbook represents the lessons learned from prior and current efforts made by communities to build partnerships between schools and community partners.

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

Margaret Wheatly

SMART GOALS

- ➔ Specific
- ➔ Measurable
- ➔ Attainable
- ➔ Relevant
- ➔ Time-bound



Use the tool

Turn Your Why >
SMART Goals to create clear, concrete goals for your partnership.

The Why

Communities that are attempting to come together can be strongly united by a common goal. Even while there may be challenges in what communities do and how they manage themselves, a common goal provides a North Star against which all decisions and actions can be made.

Establish clear, compelling goals that can guide all activities.

Communities can often agree on compelling “why” statements to motivate their work. These are often broad and aspirational. Communities truly want “All children ready for school” and “Families to have access to the resources they need,” for example. While these statements provide a rallying cry, they do not really lend themselves to guiding action – where do we start to ensure all children are ready for school, for example? We have to translate broad why statements into SMART goals. Describing goals in this way forces teams to move from slogan to action. “All children successful” becomes a series of specific goals that can identify the activities necessary to achieve the goal, provide an indication of how success will be defined, and what supports are necessary to achieve the goal, and what the expectation is for when progress will be made. By describing how each goal is relevant to the why statement.



Use the tool

Who is Our Community

to describe who lives in the community.

Engage all members of the community

To truly guide community activities, the goal needs to be shaped by the entire community. If portions of the community are excluded during the development of the goal statement, they are likely to feel excluded from the community itself. In addition, if portions of the community feel excluded, they will not participate in any of the activities designed to support the goal. When portions of the community are excluded, their needs and desires are likely to be missing (or minimized) because their voice is not there to claim them.

In identifying the members of the community, it is important to be as inclusive as possible. This means avoiding assumed representation. Consider the following examples of accidental exclusion:

Inviting the director of a large private preschool center to represent all community care providers, leaving out family care providers.

Inviting parents to represent all families, some of whom may be led by other relatives, or may be foster families.

Inviting specific groups of teachers (e.g., kindergarten teachers) which may exclude paraprofessionals, multigrade teachers.

Inviting members of the parent-teacher organization, which may exclude families without children enrolled in the school (including home-schoolers) or families not part of the PTA.

Communicating only in one language (which may exclude New Mainers and others for whom English is not a first or strong language) or via email (which would exclude individuals who do not use email).



Use the tool

Sharing the Goal identify key messages and channels for communicating them.

Own the goal across the community

Goals gain power the more they are articulated and the more people hear about them and see themselves as playing a role in meeting them. Once these are defined by the community, goals should be spread as often as possible. It is useful to develop one or more taglines – shortened versions of the goal statement that can provide even more opportunities for sharing.



Use the tool

Brief Needs Identification

to describe specific needs
for groups within the
community.

The What

The “what” connects the goal (the “why”) to the activities the community puts in place (the “how”). It starts to describe exactly what the partners are trying to achieve by identifying, prioritizing, and monitoring progress towards meeting needs for children and families in the community. While goals may be aspirational and general, specific activities should be intentionally planned to meet needs present in the community while also capitalizing on the communities strengths and assets.

Identify and define local needs

As schools and communities come together, their work becomes focused on identifying what families and children in the communities, as well as community partners, need in order for the goal to be realized. Generally speaking this process connects the goal—in order for this goal to be realized—with needs—these needs must be met. This is partly done by using the SMART goals approach outlined earlier. At this point, communities should focus only on identifying needs, without worrying about how they will be met or by whom (that comes later).

School-based partners may be most familiar with the Comprehensive Needs Assessment approach used by Title I programs in Maine, which may be used to identify needs. The Brief Needs Identification tool included here is less extensive but also may be useful in working with partners across the community unfamiliar with Title I.



Use the tool

Community Assets

to describe assets that community groups have that may be used to help address needs.

Identify local assets

While school-community partnerships focus on identifying needs, it is important to recognize that many communities also have oftentimes unique assets to draw upon. These assets include existing programs, services, or resources. Frequently they have been developed in an effort to meet community needs, which may or may not be similar to the needs identified earlier. Recognizing these local assets can help in contextualizing and prioritizing needs. Specifically:

Local assets may have been developed to address a need but have not yet been successful in doing so. They may require more time, more resources, or some modification to be successful. It is possible that they may not actually have the intended impact, in which case they would not be considered assets.

These assets can provide a foundation for additional, modified, or expanded activities that become part of the planned set of activities for the partnership. It is important to look for evidence of where these assets may be having an impact – how they are used and who is benefitting.

Identifying where these assets are located and who has authority or control over them is useful in identifying partners and team members..



Use the tool

Prioritizing Needs

to systematically organize needs based upon their importance and urgency or difficulty to meet.

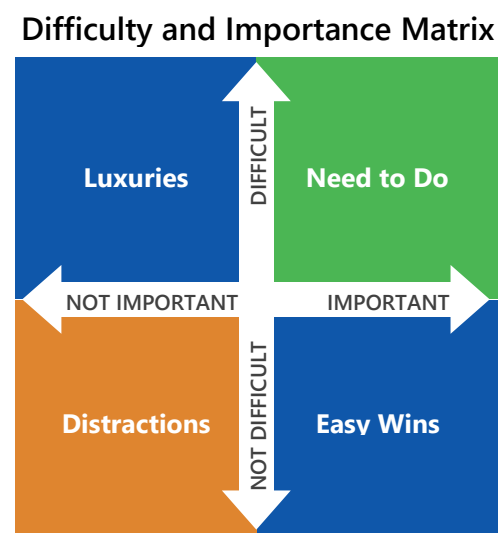
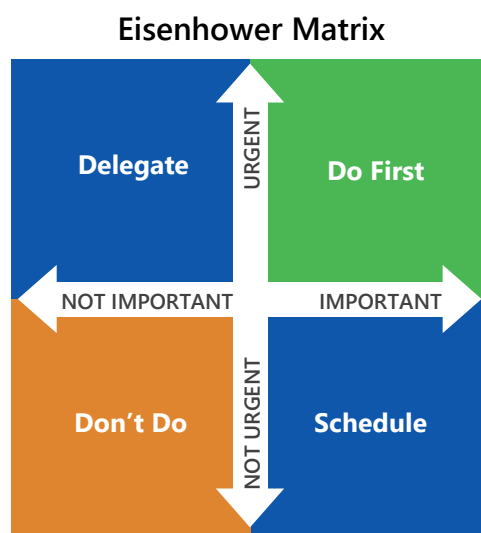
Prioritize

Unfortunately, many communities will identify multiple needs in their communities. It is important to prioritize these and there are many ways to do so. It is easy to think about prioritization as listing needs and then ranking how important they are to address. Simply doing such a to-do list is not sufficient, however.

Communities must balance resources (funding, time, staffing) over a period of time, and “the most important” might not be something that they are yet able to attempt.

With a better understanding of how important, urgent, and difficult individual needs are, they can be looked at collectively to develop a sequence (or priority) for attention. Generally speaking, this process looks at importance and urgency or difficulty, but teams may develop strategies for looking at all 3 together.

Commonly used tools such as the [Eisenhower matrix](#) and/or the [difficulty and importance matrix](#) can help teams visually organize priorities along 2 dimensions.



Though these 2 models use different criteria, they each lead to a means of prioritizing needs to address first (the green quadrant in each) and identifying those that are possibly distracting and/or likely to use resources for little impact (the orange quadrant).



Use the tool

Simplified PDSA Cycle

to plan a PDSA cycle for each activity.

For long-term efforts, it is important to periodically re-assess the criteria used to prioritize needs. These may change over time. For example, as needs are being successfully addressed, they may become less urgent, or they may now be less difficult to address because systems or programs were developed to meet them. This ongoing monitoring of prioritization is part of how communities can effectively monitor progress and ensure continuous quality improvement.

Evaluate progress

To meet the community's goals, it is important to be able to monitor everything the community does to ensure it is addressing one or more identified needs, and if not, understand why and what steps need to be taken. It may be that the activities are not being put in place effectively, so they **might** support the goal if/once done effectively. But it is also possible they are **not the right** activities.

Putting in place a process to monitor progress, such as the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model,¹ can help teams identify if an activity is not having an intended impact, or if there are ways to improve the activity to deepen its impact. The PDSA model provides a systematic means for teams to describe their activities, gather data to study its impact, and act upon the information. This final step may lead the team to stop (or abandon) the activity as ineffective, adopt it if it is deemed highly successful, or adapt by making some adjustments and repeat the PDSA cycle with a revised plan.

There are many online tools to assist teams in developing a PDSA model for their work. The National Implementation Research Network has a detailed, [downloadable template](#) or teams may use the Simplified PDSA Cycle adapted from it.

¹Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle graphic from Barron, Kenneth & Hulleman, Chris & Hartka, Thomas & Inouye, R. (2017). *Using Improvement Science to Design and Scale Up Social Psychological Interventions in Schools: The Case of the Growth Mindset App*.

A critical component of the PDSA Cycle are the data collected while implementing the activity. Identifying what data will be collected, how they will be collected, and how they will be analyzed is an important part of the PLAN model, but one that school and community partners can find challenging. These data can be qualitative (i.e., descriptive) or quantitative (i.e., numerical). Here are some examples of data that may be collected to understand how an activity was implemented and the impact it had:

- Number of sessions attended by participants
- The extent did the sessions follow the intended sequence/provide the intended material
- Child (and family) report of comfort in classroom
- Number or percentage of children screened (or registered for classes)
- Relevant child outcome (e.g., attentiveness; reading score; vocabulary, etc.)

Simplified Plan-Do-Study-Act Model





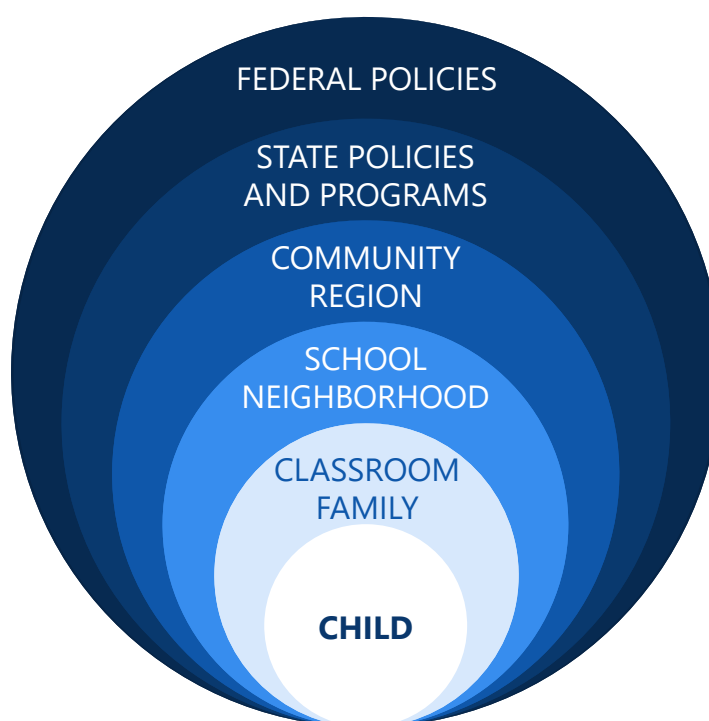
Use to the **Community Assets** tool to identify community organizations that would be potential partners.

The Who

School-community partnerships are developed and sustained by individuals from one or more community organizations and roles that come together to plan and implement activities for families and young children in the community. Engaging the whole community as partners in the work is at the heart of school-community partnerships.

Include the entire community in planning a team

Children live in and experience a complex set of environments. They live in a family unit of some configuration; they may attend an early learning center or home-based program for part of the day; they are in a school classroom part of the day; these are located in programs or schools; they live in neighborhoods that make up larger communities and so on.





Use the tool

Identifying Agents of Change in the Community

to identify key
partnering organizations.

Because children live within these different spaces, they can all positively (or negatively) affect children's learning and development—they all are potential agents of change. In developing school-community partnerships, it is important to identify the groups and organizations that align with the systems that children encounter. These are all potential partners in the work.

It is critical to include families as agents of change in the community, even though they may not be an "organization" as it is discussed above. It is useful to think of families, either as a single group or as multiple groups that should be represented on teams. Keep in mind the importance of identifying the groups within the community to avoid accidental exclusions that may occur, especially when engaging families as partners in planning and implementing activities. For example, schools often have active parent-teacher organizations, but not all families participate or are reflected in these organizations.



Use the tool

Identifying Team Members

to list members of your
team and the
organizations they
represent.

Create teams that work together

Once potential community partner organizations are identified, teams of individuals representing these partners can be formed. Teams working on education and community challenges work within the explicitly nested systems that children experience described above. When individual team members are identified, they are expected to represent the specific role(s) served by their organizations. For example, an assistant superintendent may be on the team representing the school administrative unit (SAU). In this way team members will represent all layers of the system experienced by children.

Team members also live within nested systems, so they carry with them multiple perspectives and potential roles. For example, a teacher who is also active in a local church and volunteers at the local farmers' market touches multiple community partners (and may be a parent as well). In forming a team, the goal is to have partners represented by individuals who can act on behalf of their organization or group. In the example above, the teacher can

certainly represent the classroom, and she or he may be able to provide information about the church and farmers' market but may not be able to make decisions or commitments on their behalf.

As noted earlier, families represent critical voices in addressing children's learning needs and should also be represented among community partners in planning and conducting the work. The more diverse the families are within a community, the greater representation they should have on the team to ensure that all voices are heard.

Identify critical roles and responsibilities

As the team members are identified and invited, the team will likely become quite large. Groups working together on projects may become concerned as teams get bigger, but larger teams can be managed effectively when there are clearly defined, and agreed upon roles, that team members can fill. There are many approaches teams can take to assign roles and responsibilities.

One common model simply identifies team leaders and team members. In larger groups, or teams pursuing complex projects and activities, subgroups or subcommittees may be identified, each of these with identified leaders and team members. Occasionally teams will have co-leaders.

Another means of identifying roles more common in large business settings is called a RACI matrix (see, for example, <https://project-management.com/understanding-responsibility-assignment-matrix-raci-matrix/>). In this approach individuals are given the roles of **Responsible** (those doing the work of the team); **Accountable** (the team members who determine if goals have been met, and also are authorized to make changes in what is being done and how); **Consulted** (team members that provide critical information, skills, or resources).

The model used here combines these approaches by identifying multiple roles for members of the team:



Use the tool

Identifying Team Members' Roles and Responsibilities

to describe what each
team member might
contribute to the team.
implement.

- **Lead**—takes responsibility for managing the work and is ultimately responsible for it being done. The lead often convenes meetings and assigns tasks and ensures they are completed.
- **Plan**—participates in the planning of activities and may including participating in some of the preparation for them.
- **Implement**—takes responsibility for doing one or more tasks.
- **Observe**—attends or otherwise observes activities without being a team member responsible for performing the activity. Because they are present, they can provide feedback to the team.
- **Support**—promotes and advocates for team activities. This includes providing any official recognition or authorization that may be necessary for the team's activities.

Note that team members can and often do fill multiple roles. In addition, each of these roles is important to the success of the team. While many find it obvious that there must be one or more individuals willing to "Lead", the other roles also need to be filled. Successful teams include individuals willing to fill multiple roles, and successful teams have multiple members in each role.

Note that the roles and responsibilities identified here are meant to reflect team members' roles on the team overall. Oftentimes teams will use this process to identify roles and responsibilities on specific tasks (e.g., planning kindergarten orientation day) or collections of similar tasks typically captured through a subcommittee structure (e.g., transition to school committee).



Use the tool
What Might Work?
to identify possible
activities to implement.

The How

Having set the overall goal for the school-community partnership, described the critical needs it will address, and formed critical partners to do so, teams will develop planned activities. A challenge teams may confront is wading through a large set of activities they could employ—some may be continuations of things already in place, some may be modifications of them, and others may be new. Teams can benefit from previous efforts to make sense of these options and effectively engage families with them.

Identify activities that support your goals

There is no shortage of activities that schools and communities *may* choose to do, including some that may already be in place. But not all activities are equally useful in supporting goals. Teams should work to identify how much impact different activities may be shown to have had on children, families, and public school and community early care and education providers. These should be examined for how well they align with the team's goals and address the identified needs. They should also be examined for how well they may be applied to local conditions—who lives in the community, what resources are available, and how they might be implemented. At the same time, teams get creative and try new activities they believe may be effective and utilize their plan to evaluate effectiveness to ensure they are on track.



Use the tool

Prioritizing Activities

to sort activities based upon the capacity of the team to implement an activity and the likely impact of the activity.

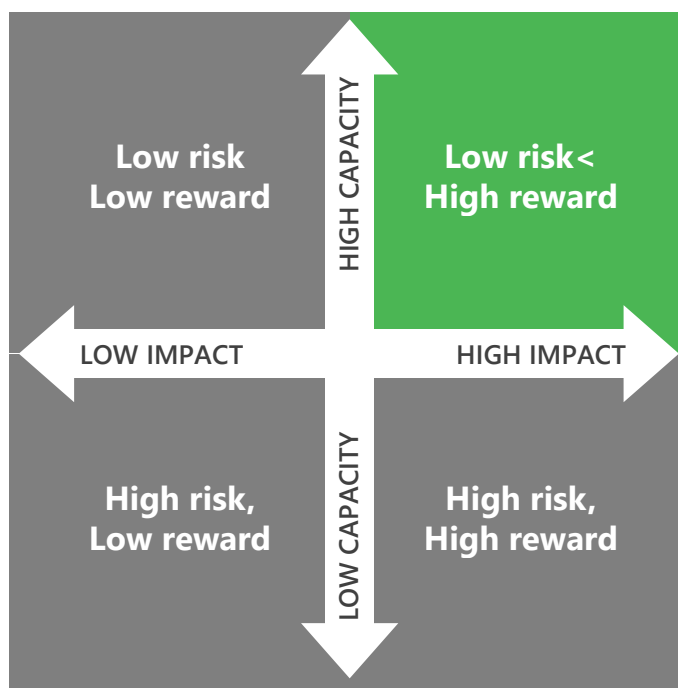
Prioritize activities to implement

Teams must prioritize from their list of possible activities those that they will commit to planning and implementing. One way they can do so is to describe for each activity how confident they are that the team can implement the activity well and what the expected impact may be.

Once activities are defined by the team capacity and likely impact, they can be charted along these dimensions to identify different levels of risk and reward for using each activity.

Using capacity to do and likelihood to impact to determine the risks and rewards of implementing specific activities.

Risk-Reward Matrix



This risk-reward matrix balances the potential impact of the activity against the capacity for the team to implement the activity to the specificity that the impact would be likely.

Using a risk-reward matrix does not always mean teams should only pursue low risk, high reward activities, at least not exclusively. Teams that are able to conduct one or more of these types of activities early in their collaboration will benefit from the “early win” when the limited risk provides a large impact. But relying only on activities that teams can already implement leads to reluctance to provide different activities for which the team is less prepared, even when they would likely have a large impact.

In developing plans, teams might also consider:

- What is the cost for implementing (funds, resources, time)? Some activities may be too costly to implement.
- Is there time sensitivity? Some activities may be connected to events going on in the community, providing a window of opportunity for activities that may push against capacity.
- To what extent does the developing plan provide for activities that address all of the needs identified by the team.

Teams will collectively determine how to balance these considerations in formulating a plan of activities for a given time period.



Use the tool

Finding Flexibility While Maintaining Focus

to identify elements of activities that are critical and those that allow flexibility in implementation.

Be flexible

While it is important to provide activities that work by following guidelines for how they have been done in the past, it is critical to recognize that they may work differently in different contexts. Being flexible in activities relies on identifying the critical components of any activity (these may be less flexible) and those that are not so critical (these may be more readily changed). For example, if the one activity to help students entering school for the first time is ensuring that parents and child meet their child’s teacher prior to the start of school, the critical aspect is connecting family and teacher, whether it occurs in the morning or afternoon, in-person or over videoconference may be less critical, adjust what you can to make things work.



Use the tool

Community Traditions

to identify long-time traditions within the community.



Use the tool

Finding Families

to identify spaces within the community where families congregate.



Use the tool

Strategies for Reaching Families

to identify spaces within the community where families congregate.

Plug in local traditions and customs

Many communities have their own rhythms—they have events that are traditions and customs that are the foundation of the community. This can create both challenges and opportunities. Especially strong traditions are resistant to change—there may be slight modifications or additions, but large changes may create immediate resistance. At the same time, as enduring parts of the community, these traditions can provide secure stepping-off points for new or expanded activities.

Finding families

Most communities will include family engagement as a central aspect of their goals and activities. Yet reaching families can be a challenge. Critically, finding families—where they are, what they do, and what organizations or activities tend to attract (or dissuade) families requires multiple team members' observations and input.

Reaching families

Once families are found, determine how they want to be engaged—do they want in-person or virtual events; are they active on social media (and which ones); will they come to the school, a community partner location, or do you need to go to them?

Center child and family needs

Despite being focused on children's learning and development, many school-driven activities do not center the child or family's needs. They focus on what can be done rather than on what children and families might experience. Teams must look at processes and systems from the child or family viewpoint and ask how many decisions are made from the school or community program's needs rather than the needs of the family or the child. Programs that run during the school day for families assume that families are available (meaning free from work or other caregiving responsibilities) to participate. After school activities are convenient, but for many younger children, extra hour(s) at school after the school day has ended may be a challenge. Weekends and evenings may work best for some families, but these may not work for educators who would be providing activities after their workday has ended.

Teams should prominently display participating school calendars that affect teachers and students. These may include public-facing calendars that families see, but also operational calendars that affect school buildings.



Use the tool **Calendar of Important Events** to note significant events in the life of the congregate.

The When

Work within the school calendar

As a practical matter, school calendars drive much of what happens in schools. Whether set at the SAU or building level, events on school calendars are often driven by many factors that make changing dates for specific events challenging. Schools may have carved out dates for registration, screening, and orientation activities that cannot be changed. This scheduling is often driven by requirements and demands set of the school (e.g., a state-mandated school holidays), and may not be as sensitive to school or community needs. Awareness of potential schedule challenges, and as possible, flexibility in the school-based calendar, are essential when building or improving connections with families and community partners

At the same time, while calendars drive expectations on a yearly basis, it is important to consider changes to the school calendar that may make sense in light of community goals and activities. Having the SAU engaged in the goals may open doors to some flexibility in what may otherwise be hard-to-change details about operations.

Work outside the school calendar

While school calendars define what happens in schools, child and families experience communities—including other services and activities—that are not bound to the school calendar. Local traditions and customs identified earlier are scheduled and their dates will be important for planning activities. Other community events that may offer opportunities to engage families and children should also be noted. These may occur year-round. Teams that can identify these events can also identify opportunities these events may provide them to engage families



Use the tool

Preempting Time Conflicts

to identify each partners'
time-related constraints.

and children. Including sponsoring organization(s) can facilitate outreach and planning for possible activities.

Negotiate time challenges in good faith

In bringing together partners from across communities it will become clear that calendars and daily hours often vary across organizations in communities. Community early care and education programs may be open from 6 am–6 pm (or longer hours), meaning engaging workers in these settings may be a challenge during a typical school day. The school day may run from 8:30 am–3 pm, but access to the building outside those hours may be restricted or limited to only certain individuals.

Likewise, some partners in the work may have guidelines about how many hours they can work and when they may work that need to be considered when collaborating. Some team members may need permission to work outside of their regular hours.

Oftentimes, as teams try to establish schedules, frustrations with conflicting role-related time demands threaten to become personal. When multiple organizations attempt to collaborate, scheduling conflicts are inevitable, but they do not need to undermine the team's ability to work collaboratively. Identifying potential time challenges, limitations, or constraints ahead of time reduces the risk of conflict. It may also provide opportunities for teams to work towards eliminating these challenges over time.

Note that the time challenges here are those based upon organizational or community schedules, not individual or personal decisions. Individual team members' scheduling conflicts are individual, and teams must agree to respect these as much as they respect organizational scheduling challenges.

Putting the Pieces Together

With the why, what, who, how, and when identified, it is time to create a plan for activities to keep everyone focused. The plan can be as sophisticated as the team is comfortable with, but it should include in one place relevant information to effectively conduct the activity. This should also include any resources that are needed. The tools included in this playbook can be used to collect this information, but teams should utilize tools and systems that are available to them, and that allow for the greatest access across the team.

There is a danger in these partnerships that one or just a few individuals “hold the knowledge.” This creates a liability for continuity of the work should these individuals leave the project or community—the knowledge may be lost with them! So, plans help sustain the work. Plans can also be valuable resources in advocating for continuing the work and for obtaining funding and resources.

Finally, it is critically important to share success! Intentionally connect positive impacts to the set of activities that led to them, and celebrate the collaborative efforts needed to implement them. The resulting culture of community-based change can be its own engine for sustainability and even expansion. As the community recognizes its collective power, it can identify even more goals and devise teams and plans to meet them.

Selected Resources

School-Community Partnerships

Community Partnerships. This brief from the Institute of Education Sciences summarizes the research behind school-community partnerships and provides a set of implementation considerations.

First 10 Resources (EDC). EDC's First 10 initiative supports school-community partnerships that develop plans and use strategies shown in the [First 10 theory of action](#). The Resource page includes evaluation reports and other support materials.

Family, School, and Community Partnerships Strategy Guide 2.0. (Colorado Department of Education). This guide includes a summary of the research base for school-community partnerships as well as a set of core components, elements, and activities (with embedded links to tools) for teams to use in building and using partnerships.

Family Engagement

Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2). The Framework is primarily intended for district and school leaders to describe conditions necessary for effective family engagement. The site includes [resources](#), some of which are intended to support for teachers and school leaders.

The National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE). The NAFSCE website includes numerous resources and access to engagement toolkits.



With decades of experience in education, arts, humanities, and healthcare RMC Research engages with clients to measure their effectiveness and meet their goals to create opportunities for families, schools, and communities.

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