

# ED371108 1994-04-00 Urban Teachers and Collaborative School-Linked Services. ERIC Digest 96.

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**Author:** Burnett, Gary

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## Urban Teachers and Collaborative School-Linked Services. ERIC Digest 96.

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Increasingly, teachers in urban schools across the United States are finding themselves at the center of a vast web of interconnected social problems. Far from being able to concentrate on the singular task of educating their students, teachers are also being called upon to act as brokers for a diverse array of social and health services -- services which, while not traditionally within their purview, can help ameliorate the problems placing students at risk of educational failure.

While urban teachers obviously cannot provide these services themselves, they can play a major role in building and maintaining the partnerships and linkages with the outside social service agencies that are able to deliver them, and can facilitate use of these services by students and their families (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1989). In fact, the school site is increasingly the location of choice for social service provision, in effect functioning as a centralized clearinghouse for a set of school-linked services.

This digest provides some guidelines for developing partnerships between schools and outside service agencies, and suggests some of the roles that teachers can play in the process.

## COMMON SCHOOL-LINKED PROGRAMS

Many types of school-linked programs are currently in operation. In a recent review of 55 collaborative programs, for instance, Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (in press) outline the following common programs:



\* parent and family programs, including parent education, school readiness, and life skills programs;



\* programs for sexually active teens, including teen pregnancy and teen parenting programs;



\* dropout prevention programs;



\* substance abuse programs, for both alcohol and drugs; and

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- \* integrated services programs, combining a wide range of services including health, vocational, educational, and other social services into a single program.

Not surprisingly, given such range, many disparate service providers have joined with the schools in these programs. It is not uncommon, for instance, to find representatives of social service agencies, health and mental health agencies, churches, welfare agencies, universities, or senior citizens groups present on school campuses as participants in a school-linked program.

## DEVELOPING A PROGRAM

**LEVELS OF COLLABORATION** Although collaborations between schools and service providers most often begin at the highest levels of administration, the successful provision of services depends not only upon administrators, but also on the school people in direct contact with students, including classroom teachers. Bruner (1991) outlines four levels of collaboration necessary for a successful program:

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- \* Collaboration between administrators. This kind of top-level collaboration provides the necessary institutional support for an effective joint program, and often supplies the impetus for identifying student needs.

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- \* Collaboration between social service providers and school personnel, including teachers. In a real sense, successful services are provided not by agencies but by individuals; these professionals are responsible for making the day-to-day work of the collaboration function smoothly, and they should also play a major role in designing and planning the programs.

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- \* Collaboration between members of a participating agency. Both school personnel and service providers must be able to work successfully with other representatives of their own agencies. This can help ensure a collegial atmosphere in a collaboration.

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- \* Collaboration between teachers, social service providers, and families. This is the level at which services are actually delivered. Good collaborative programs emphasize

the point of contact between providers and clients; they adequately train providers, as well as teachers, and take steps to free them from excessive paperwork. In most schools, the teachers already have established contact with parents; they can thus serve as intermediaries, both helping families get the services they need and helping providers make contact with the families who need their services.

## ESTABLISHING THE COLLABORATION

School administrators must go out of their way to find appropriate service providers who are willing to become partners. Lontos (1991) offers a number of recommendations. Educators should actively:



\* reach out to the community rather than wait for social service agencies to contact them;



\* participate in community groups and activities, taking on the role of community leaders; and



\* seek out information on the activities of local service agencies, setting up one-on-one and group meetings, and drawing upon the knowledge that their classroom teachers already possess about local services.

In addition, Lontos suggests, once initial contact has been established, administrators should:



\* learn as much as possible about the operations of service providers including the ways in which their decision-making process works so that they may work with them more effectively;



\* elicit the active input of the service providers, including their criticisms of school operations; and



\* be willing both to take risks and to make compromises in the interest of a successful

collaboration, thus making the service providers full partners in the program.

## DEFINING NEEDS

Each school is part of a unique community with a singular mix of needs and problems; in urban areas in particular, this mix may be made more complex by the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity of the population (Chang, 1993). Thus, collaborative programs must make customized responses to the actual needs of local students and families (Levy & Shepardson, 1992). As those who come into the closest daily contact with students, teachers have both the fullest vision of their students' needs, and a natural stake in designing an effective collaborative service program. Thus, they should take an active and early role in the planning process, both to ensure that the students' most essential needs are addressed and that other planners do not lose sight of the school's primary mission: the education of students (Jehl & Kirst, 1993). For example, they can work closely with parents and other community representatives, making sure that the ways in which services are offered to students take into account the community cultural and linguistic makeup (Chang, 1993).

## DEFINING GOALS

Most traditional social service programs are crisis-oriented; they provide valuable services in response to emergencies, but do little to meet needs in an ongoing and pro-active way (Melaville & Blank, 1991). Key to an effective school-linked collaboration, however, is the establishment of clearly stated and measurable goals and desired outcomes at the outset, in order to identify and respond to student needs before they reach the crisis stage (Bruner, 1991). In addition, since most teachers have traditionally dealt with service providers only in times of crisis, program goals should include methods of enhancing the ongoing communication between teachers and service providers, thus ensuring that service providers can draw upon the expertise and knowledge of teachers, and that teachers have a clear understanding of what services are available (Jehl & Kirst, 1993).

## MAINTAINING THE COLLABORATION

In addition to making a program operate pro-actively, clearly stated goals can help keep the collaboration itself functioning effectively through specific guidelines for the ongoing roles and activities of each participant (Bruner, 1991). Goals can also go far to establish firm accountability for each participant, thus helping to cultivate a shared vision for the project (Melaville & Blank, 1991).

In any strong project, both formal and informal structures for ongoing communication between partners should be in place, as part of the program's daily operations and to allow partners to share information about the changing needs of their community (Liontos, 1990; Melaville & Blank, 1991).

## CONCLUSION

Teachers are the primary service providers for the children in their classrooms. As such, they can be the force that makes school-linked programs work, acting not only as the essential channels of communication between service providers and local communities, but also as full and committed participants in the daily delivery of social services. The full participation of teachers can do much to fulfill the hopes raised by the implementation of school-linked programs.

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