



State Education Agency Support for School/Community Collaboration

by

Shelly Hara

Council of Chief State School Officers

with William Boyd

LSS Senior Research Associate and Professor at Pennsylvania State University

INTRODUCTION

American schools can no longer afford to operate in isolation. As a result, many school-linked and school-based health and human service programs have sprung up around the country. Schools are also reaching out to parents and the community to strengthen students' educational foundations.

State education agencies play a role in supporting many of these school-community partnerships, primarily for two reasons: they seek to ensure the educational success of all students (collaboration being a means to that end); and, secondly, they view themselves as key partners in larger, broader-based efforts to ensure the overall well-being of children and families.

This *Spotlight* contains research on several mid-Atlantic states from 1996-97 highlighting the increasing role state education agencies play in supporting school-community collaborations.

Cabinet-Level Activities

The highest levels of state government have undertaken collaborative efforts on behalf of children and families. For instance, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania each have cross-

agency collaborative activity focusing on children and families. In each case, the chief state school officer and state education agency participate.

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Delaware, for example, has a Family Services Cabinet Council made up of cabinet-level officials and deputies representing the departments of housing; labor; public safety; health and social services; children, youth, and families; finance; and education. The governor's office also is represented, and Governor Carper attends alternate meetings.

Established in 1993, the Council's mission is to design and implement alternatives for school- and community-based family-centered services, act as a catalyst for public-private partnerships, and

make it easier for families to get supportive services.

In 1988, the governor of Maryland created a Subcabinet for Children, Youth, and Families, comprising the heads of the major child-serving agencies, including education, and the Department of Budget and Management. Each participating department contributes to the subcabinet fund, which reached \$98 million for fiscal year 1997. A new cabinet-level position, Special Secretary for Children, Youth, and Families, also was created to ensure effective collaboration among the child-serving agencies.

The goal of Maryland's services reform effort is to develop a model of comprehensive local services delivery with an emphasis on community-directed initiatives. The effort has focused on children placed out of state and those at risk of out-of-home placement.

In some states, the focus of such a collaboration may be narrower or less formal. In 1996, New Jersey's Governor Whitman established an "urban initiative." The initiative at first focused on four urban areas and was led by an interdepartmental working group of high-level officials from state departments, including education.

In Pennsylvania, a children's cabinet existed under Governor Casey. Currently, under Governor Ridge, the full cabinet meets monthly, and collaborates in policy groups called clusters, such as the Workforce Development cluster involving education, welfare, labor, industry, commerce, and economic development.

Challenges and Barriers

While everyone agrees that collaboration is the call of the day and necessary to create the systems that support children, youth, and their families, there are still many barriers and challenges to be overcome, including:

- Bureaucratic and cultural differences between education and collaborating agencies
- Pressure on educators to be accountable for discrete educational results, and
- The time, money, and frequent contact it takes to build working relationships and collaborations.

Promising Practices

Despite the barriers, support for a child and family agenda at the highest levels can help collaborative efforts in communities. A formal structure, such as a children's "cabinet," can facilitate and establish collaboration as an expectation.

Members of Delaware's Family Services Cabinet Council stated that Governor Carper's commitment to children and families and the Cabinet Council itself was very important to their ongoing collaborative efforts. They also stated that although Cabinet Council members do not agree about everything, they can and do work well together. Governor Carper seems to have actively sought individuals with collaboration skills when he selected members of his Cabinet.

Leadership of the state education agency around a collaborative agenda is also

important. Staff from the Maryland State Department of Education cited continuity in leadership in their department as key to their ongoing efforts to support school-community collaboration. Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick has been the chief state school officer since 1991 and also served as the Special Secretary for Children, Youth, and Families in the early years of Maryland's System Reform Initiative.

While high-level state support is vital, collaboration at the school-community level is equally important. To that end, the Improving America's Schools Act allows schools and districts to engage in more comprehensive planning through the consolidated planning process. For example, the Maryland Department of Education gives local school systems the option of submitting a consolidated application for federal and state program funds through a single consolidated plan, which is then approved for three years rather than annually, allowing for more long-range planning.

Other mechanisms can be employed to promote and support collaboration. The New Jersey Department of Human Services has worked in partnership with IBM to develop a statewide interagency data system, in which various service providers representing different service sectors can access a single database for the families served.

CONCLUSION

The degree of government agency support for local partnerships teeters on the dependence of many factors. Despite such bureaucratic challenges, however, state education agencies in the aforementioned mid-Atlantic states are increasingly supporting and working with collaborations at the school-community level. It is at this grassroots level that diverse and

interdisciplinary groups of professionals are working together to support children and families.

The increase in collaborative activities in recent years is testament to educators' recognition that they can no longer operate in isolation if they hope to guarantee students' success in school.

Related Publications

- Driscoll, M. E., & Boyd, B. (1996). *Collaborative Services Initiatives: A Report of a National Survey of Program Directors*. Philadelphia, PA: The National Center on Education in the Inner Cities: Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education.
- Governor's Task Force on Children, Youth, and Families Systems Reform (1996). *Final Report: Recommendations to Governor Parris N. Glendening on Reforming Maryland's System of Services to Children and Families*.
- Haertel, G. D., & Wang, M. C. (1997). *Coordination, Cooperation, Collaboration: What We Know About School-linked Services*. Philadelphia, PA: Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University for Research in Human Development and Education.
- Hutchins, J. (1997). *Families Valued: The Emergence of State Collaborative Governance Structures for Child and Family Policy*. Washington, DC: The Family Impact Seminar.
- Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1993). *School-Linked Services: A Research Synthesis*. Philadelphia, PA: The National Center on Education in the Inner Cities: Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education.