



More is often accomplished together than alone. Recognition of this reality is prompting many education agencies to form cooperative relationships. Whether they identify themselves as partnerships, alliances, or collaboratives, such efforts bring within reach what might otherwise remain only a distant goal to each organization on its own.

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This brief is one in a series exploring the benefits and challenges of education partnerships.

By definition, education alliances comprise diverse organizations, each with its own culture, resources, ways of working, and decision-making practices. A single partnership could represent, for example, small and large school districts from both rural and urban areas, community colleges, universities, businesses, and social service agencies. Given the possible range of their differences, how can multiple agencies work together successfully toward a common goal?

Effective partnerships use a number of common strategies to build and sustain healthy relationships that yield desired results. Drawing on WestEd's own work with education alliances, recent interviews with alliance participants, and an extensive review of the research literature, this brief identifies key components or conditions that contribute to their success. While it highlights the experiences of three partnerships with a similar composition — school districts collaborating with a support provider, such as a university or a community college — WestEd's work and research reveal that the lessons learned in these three alliances are broadly applicable.

Shared Mission, Goals, and Objectives

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of establishing initial agreement about the purpose of working together. Alliances work best when all members have agreed on the common needs or issues to be addressed.

Many education partnerships form around a generalized mission, such as improving student achievement through better assessments or better use of technology. Success, however, requires greater precision in purpose. A careful needs assessment can help define the overlap of most-critical needs across all member agencies. Based on these needs, the partnership can then develop a more specific set of goals that will guide its work.

Partnerships profit not just from a formal needs assessment, but from time spent talking specifically about goals and objectives: what members hope the alliance will accomplish, how they plan to achieve their goals, and what evidence they will use to know they have succeeded. Goals must be concrete, clearly written, consistent, and attainable, and all partnership members must agree on how to attain them. Partnership activities must be designed to meet the specified goals and objectives, with outcomes identified for measuring success.

The Arizona Assessment Collaborative (AzAC)¹ offers an example of how alliances move from the general to the specific in considering purposes. The alliance was conceived out of a general consensus among Phoenix-area superintendents that their districts needed more effective assessments, but that no one district had the capacity to make great strides on its own. Assessment seemed a logical focus for collaboration. During AzAC's start-up period, members then participated in a needs assessment to help them narrow that focus: If they

wanted to improve assessment, where should they start and how should they go about it? The curriculum directors representing each district began meeting to discuss particulars. From their own discussions, the directors identified a shared assessment priority: the development of standards-based assessments in reading for grades 3 through 7 in English and Spanish.

Through this early work, other district needs were identified and prioritized, with collaborative activities then planned to address them. Among the designated activities, for example, was training for district and

school administrators in analyzing and interpreting student achievement results for the purposes of program planning and accountability. Such early efforts that benefit all members help to launch partnerships.

A partnership must also be practical in the scope and number of its initiatives.

While a partnership should be responsive and flexible, it must also be practical in the scope and number of its initiatives. Too many goals make it unlikely that any single one will be fully achieved. It's also important to regularly revisit or reassess members' needs and interests to ensure that the partnership continues addressing critical and shared needs.

The Northeastern Nevada Technology Consortium (NNTC)² regularly revisits goals prior to submitting its annual plan to the Nevada Department of Education for how it will use its grant money from the state's Technology Literacy Challenge Fund. The consortium's general purpose had initially been to build member organizations' capacity to use technology to improve teaching and learning. NNTC identified three major activities: staff development, technical assistance, and support to schools identified as high-poverty and low-technology sites. The group focused staff development on increasing teachers' technology skills. But as teachers from member districts have become increasingly adept at using computers, the alliance has shifted its focus. Today, three years after its inception, NNTC

concentrates on enabling educators to integrate curriculum and technology to improve instruction.

Partnerships must address goals that are important to all members. But it helps to recognize in advance that, depending on the goal, some specific objectives may benefit certain members more than others. In the NNTC, for example, members decided to initially spend grant money on schools in member districts that it had identified as being low performing technologically. Naturally, some districts received more consortium funding than others. Yet, once the low-performing schools were adequately equipped with technology, subsequent funding was spent on technology-related staff development, which benefited all members. “You can’t go into a partnership and expect to be the benefactor every time,” says one partnership participant. “But you have to make sure that, ultimately, every member comes out ahead.”

Organizational Structure and Governance

Agreement about partnership organization is as important as agreement about purpose. Members should establish policies and guidelines for how they will function as a group and, specifically, how they will share responsibility, resources, and authority. Some alliances formalize their effort through an interagency agreement or a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Some opt to operate through the creation of a freestanding, not-for-profit agency. Some collaborate informally.

The appropriate type and specifics of a governance structure depend on a number of factors, including the developmental stage of a partnership, its size and complexity, local context, and the community served by the partnership. But in any case, when thinking about governance, members should consider both the overall operations of the alliance and its more task-oriented

aspects. Some partnerships create a standing governing group to make broad policy decisions, while relying on smaller ad hoc task forces, steering committees, or work groups to make day-to-day decisions. Whatever the structure, there must be a shared understanding of the general roles and responsibilities of each member

agency and the partnership-specific roles of the individuals who represent each agency.

To formalize their collaborative work, founding members of Utah’s Student Success Alliance (SSA)³ signed an MOU that briefly describes the group’s mission, goals,

and governing policies, including the composition and responsibilities of its governing board. After the first year, an SSA task force further defined its governance structures, including specifics about how and by whom decisions should be made. SSA’s primary governing body is its Regional Council, composed of a representative from each partner agency. The council, in turn, creates ad hoc design teams to investigate specific issues and to implement subsequent decisions.

In its first two years, the Arizona Assessment Collaborative operated without any formalized agreement. Only recently did it adopt an MOU, which describes general agreements, expectations, and decision-making processes. The MOU is signed anew each year as a way of ensuring that partners reexamine and restate their commitment to the effort. This process also serves as a prompt for the group to examine progress.

Any organizational and leadership structure must somehow balance power among member agencies, irrespective of their sizes. In the interest of complete buy-in, all parties should be considered responsible for planning, decisionmaking, evaluation, and some aspect of leadership. If possible, specific duties and responsibilities related to the partnership should be included in the home-agency job descriptions of alliance participants, and their alliance work should be considered in their performance evaluations. This

*Balance of
power is paramount
for an alliance.*

WestEd's Partnership Work

WestEd's work with education partnerships has focused on scaling up effective school practices to a larger aggregate of collaborative systems in order to yield a broader and deeper impact on student learning. WestEd has played a multifaceted role in various partnerships. Depending on the needs of the alliance, WestEd has served as convener, facilitator, and technical assistance provider. Equally important, it has provided a link to external resources, promising practices, and exemplary programs, processes, and products. An overall goal has been to learn from its work and contribute to the developing body of knowledge about developing and sustaining education partnerships.

documentation helps ensure that partnership work not be perceived as an add-on, but is seen, instead, as an integral part of someone's scope of work.

The participation of top-level managers from member agencies (e.g., superintendents, school board members, college presidents, executive directors) is essential. If they are not directly participating in the work-a-day life of the alliance, they must find other ways of expressing their commitment. Without that clear commitment, effective collaboration can remain elusive, with agency representatives questioning the degree to which they should commit personnel and other resources. Equally important is the participation of site administrators and other staff from member agencies (e.g., principals and teachers, college or university faculty). Their involvement broadens the perspective represented in the alliance and deepens the buy-in.

Leadership

In the context of collaborative relationships, leadership is not as straightforward a concept as it is in an individual organization.⁴ In multi-agency partnerships, leaders play a variety of roles, among them: advocating for the partnership; facilitating the partnership's purpose, goals, and activities; developing consensus; and brokering and linking the partnership to resources. But

leadership need not be embodied in one individual. In fact, shared leadership seems to strengthen alliances. Through distributed leadership, an alliance broadens ownership, knowledge of organizational history, and understanding of what it takes to run a partnership.

In some alliances, a leader emerges informally, by force of an individual's personality, expertise or, simply, enthusiasm and willingness to take on the job. At the other end of the spectrum, a partnership may choose to hire an executive director to handle many of the leadership responsibilities. While doing so can ease the burden on representatives of member agencies, cost can eliminate this option for many alliances. A more common approach is for participants to share leadership responsibilities through creation of a governing board or steering committee that oversees the effort. These groups may, in turn, designate someone as a "chair," to serve for a defined term or for an open-ended period. At the NNTC, for example, a superintendent of a member school district serves as consortium chair. When he or she leaves for any reason, the position rotates to another superintendent. The Arizona Assessment Collaborative also operates with a chair, but in this case the chair works closely with a vice-chair. At the end of each year, the vice-chair becomes chair and someone else steps into the "assistant" position. This chair-in-training approach helps ensure a smooth leadership transition.

A good leader will help partnership participants stay focused on the big picture, but it is equally important to have someone manage the details. While a leader sometimes handles details as well, such as setting agendas, taking minutes, or scheduling meetings, a better option, if possible, is to follow the lead of the NNTC, which hired a staff person — the technology coordinator — to handle day-to-day administrative responsibilities. The AzAC has taken a different approach, divvying up administrative tasks by designating two volunteer 'secretarial' positions, which rotate annually.

Whether for leadership or administrative duties, alliance participants interviewed for this brief caution against becoming too dependent on any one person or agency.

Such reliance can overload the individual or agency, sometimes leading to resentment if it appears that others are not carrying their weight. Also, if that key person or agency pulls out of the partnership for some reason, remaining members can be left floundering.

Communication

The success of a partnership depends greatly on effective communication, both formal and informal.

Good communication can help keep participants engaged and focused. It is also the means for taking advantage of one of the group's most important problem-solving resources: the diverse knowledge and experiences of its members.

External communication is also important, helping a partnership garner greater support for its efforts.

Individual participants should be reporting regularly to colleagues in their own agencies about their work with the partnership. Community meetings, partnership newsletters, local newspapers, and Web sites can then be used to explain the work and achievements of an alliance to the broader community. From a larger perspective, a partnership that communicates well can unite the voices of its member organizations into a stronger political force, one that can yield an effective relationship with its state department of education and state legislature.

The Arizona Assessment Collaborative developed a PowerPoint presentation to serve multiple communication goals. It describes how AzAC's standards-based assessments were developed, addressing issues of validity and reliability. AzAC participants use the presentation to communicate with colleagues and the school board in their respective districts to garner support for the new assessments. New members can use the presentation, which is posted on the alliance's Web site, to bring themselves up to speed.

Budgets, Resources, and External Funding

Among the ongoing or one-time costs that can come up for partnerships are alliance-specific staffing, materials, evaluation, and administration. Partnerships develop resources in a variety of ways. Some seek outside funding; some use a formal dues structure to generate funds from member organizations; some rely on informal contributions — fiscal and/or in-kind — from member agencies; and some rely on a combination of the above.

Agencies with greater fiscal resources should not have greater control because they pay more in dues.

In setting a formal contribution structure, balance is key: no single agency should be expected to come up with more than it can reasonably afford, yet those agencies with greater fiscal resources should not have greater control in the alliance because they pay more in dues.

Even when members contribute informally or in-kind, an alliance must find a way to balance participation so that one agency is not providing so much more than others that it either feels pressured or deserving of more authority within the partnership.

Each alliance interviewed for this brief uses a different strategy for developing and managing its fiscal resources. The NNTC receives grant money from Nevada's Technology Literacy Challenge Fund, with its largest member district serving as fiscal agent. Utah's SSA also relies on grant money, but also has a dues system for members. Depending on the particular grant and what it will be used for, funds may be managed by a member district or the university. The AzAC, on the other hand, has sought no outside funding, relying almost entirely on members' in-kind contributions in the form of personnel to carry out the main work of the alliance. Any direct costs for services or products are split, either equally or proportionally depending on what's being bought (e.g., the cost of individual licenses to use a software product vs. the cost of printing test booklets, which districts will need in varying numbers).

Whether a partnership relies on external funding or on fiscal or in-kind membership contributions, it should avoid becoming overly dependent on any one source of support. In the case of outside grants, there may come a time when the money simply runs out or a funder shifts priorities. In the case of membership contributions, a member that has contributed disproportionately to the partnership may decide it can no longer afford to commit to such a degree. Diversification of funding is essential. Additionally, an alliance should suggest that each member agency include as line items in its own budget funds for partnership operations and activities. Such a budget line item will help institutionalize the partnership and its work.

Collaborative Culture of Partnership

Partnerships do best when they are able to generate an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Members should assess the climate of the partnership on a regular basis, checking to make sure all participants feel their views are respected and the needs of their home agencies are being met. Participants must be able to acknowledge and openly discuss differences among the agencies' cultures and be able to compromise. If partner agencies have successfully worked together before, the alliance can build on that foundation. If their prior work relationship was not a good one, partners will need to be straightforward in identifying and addressing old conflicts and tensions in order to work more compatibly in the new alliance. In general, an alliance should move quickly to identify and address budding internal conflicts — preventing turf issues, petty jealousies, or personal agendas from hindering the success of the alliance.

In any education partnership there are potential spark points for conflicts. Among them are decisions about

how to use partnership resources, differing perceptions of how equitably resources and benefits are shared among partners, ramifications of budget cuts or administrative changes within member agencies, and competition outside of the partnership for limited financial resources and for qualified teachers. Absent a trusting environment, any of these factors could threaten the survival of a collaborative relationship.

If mistrust exists, members are less likely to be open about any internal problems at their own agencies that could affect the partnership. They are also less likely to share resources than they otherwise might be.

Finally, those who represent their agency in a partnership need to feel that their work is valued by their own agency and by the partnership as a whole. An individual agency can endorse — or undermine — the individual's work through its performance evaluation process. A partnership can express its appreciation for the work of individual representatives at meetings, at celebratory events, or through press releases to local newspapers that highlight aspects of its work and of those who are principally carrying it out.

Professional Development Culture

Alliance participants will be most committed when they feel that they, like their agencies, are profiting from the experience. This is most likely to occur when they receive meaningful professional development, either formally (e.g., specific training) or informally (e.g., through conversations with their peers). In the ideal, what participants learn through their alliance work will help them be more effective for the alliance, and in non-alliance work as well.

Alliance participants interviewed for this brief uniformly note the many benefits their alliance work has yielded for them, personally and professionally. They speak of learning from partnership colleagues. Equally important, they speak of developing solid relationships that enable them to subsequently draw on the expertise, advice, or assistance of these individuals on matters extending beyond the work of the partnership.

These same participants attest to the importance of drawing on the expertise of external support providers, such as universities, community colleges, or other technical assistance providers. The involvement of such entities, either as members or consultants, increases access to knowledge, expertise, and resources. This enhances both the quality of the partnership's work and the capacity of member agencies.

Both NNTC and SSA have included an institute of higher education in their partnerships, and each notes the value of being able to tap into faculty expertise, not just on issues related to the goals of the partnership, but also on non-partnership issues. All three partnerships — AzAC, NNTC, and SSA — have sought outside expertise from technical assistance providers. AzAC, for example, has received valued assistance from WestEd and Arizona State University - West. Through this capacity-building relationship, the group received extensive training and support in developing valid and reliable reading assessments. Drawing on the assessment-development capacity developed through that process, the collaborative has since brought on additional teachers and new member districts to help develop standards-based assessment in mathematics.

Evaluation

As noted earlier, partnerships profit from periodically revisiting their mission and evaluating their work. Doing so helps ensure that the partnership targets the needs of its members and makes progress in reaching its goals. This process also helps renew members' commitment. Ongoing vision building is especially

helpful when bringing aboard new partners or new representatives for partner agencies.

A partnership should establish evaluation procedures for monitoring its effectiveness. Assessing progress can help it identify what still needs to be done, what needs to be reconsidered, and possible areas of future work.

Utah's SSA sponsored a planning retreat, during which participants revisited their vision and work over the prior several years. In preparation, WestEd surveyed participants to glean their perceptions and ideas about such things as the purpose of the alliance, the benefits they had received from participating, challenges, factors contributing to the success of their alliance, issues needing to be addressed, and possible next steps. That information was then used to assist in planning the future of the partnership and its various initiatives.

Conclusion

Partnerships require commitment, work, and focused attention. But the potential pay-off makes such efforts worthwhile. An effective partnership can promote a more comprehensive and efficient approach to addressing common education challenges. It can also serve as a forum for exploring issues, exchanging advice, and solving problems, as well as for mutual support and professional growth. Using the strategies highlighted in this brief, partnerships can build and sustain productive collaborative relationships that enable them to achieve their school improvement goals.

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ENDNOTES

¹ To illustrate its points, this brief draws primarily on three education partnerships with which it has worked most closely, including the Arizona Assessment Collaborative. It is an informal consortium of rural and suburban school districts in the Phoenix, Arizona area that has developed standards-based assessments in reading in both English and Spanish, with technical assistance from WestEd and Arizona State University – West. It has expanded to include seventeen school districts in Phoenix, as well as one in Tucson, and is now developing standards-based mathematics assessments.

² The Northeastern Nevada Technology Consortium is a formal alliance consisting of five rural school districts, Great Basin College, and WestEd. It was created in 1997 to develop greater capacity in its members for using technology to improve teaching and learning.

³ The Student Success Alliance, located in northwestern Utah, is a formal partnership of six school districts, the Utah School for the Deaf and the Blind, Weber State University, and WestEd. Since 1995, this consortium has provided professional development activities for its member organizations. Its initial focus was on enabling staff to meet the needs of English Language Learners. After experiencing success in this arena, the alliance developed a regional model for professional development and has since expanded its mission to include instructional leadership for principals and action research for teachers.

⁴ For more information about leadership in education partnerships, see Briggs, D. (2000). *Managing Leadership Transitions in Education Partnerships*, San Francisco: WestEd.

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