

Building Effective Partnerships with Schools

Briefing note

1. Introduction

Improving the quality of education in South Africa's public schools is one of the essential goals of the National Development Plan. Given the challenges faced by many schools in our country, it has become widely accepted that they will be unable to fully achieve their improvement goals on their own unless networks of support are built around the learners. Efforts from external stakeholders/partners to support the work of schools are thus commendable. However, many well-intentioned initiatives to support schools do not deliver on its intended outcomes due to difficulties that often arise during the course of the partnership. Many of these can be avoided if more attention is paid to laying the groundwork for an effective partnership before the activities begin. In other words, organizations, groups, or individuals, in their eagerness to start the work/projects in schools, often forget to do the necessary due diligence work upfront that clarifies goals, roles, expectations, and outcomes for everyone involved in the partnership. In this brief, we clarify some of the concepts that define school partnerships and suggest some steps to follow in order to ensure its success in schools.

2. Defining partnerships in schools

A partnership can be defined as an activity or set of activities that are underpinned by a common goal/s. In this endeavour, different education stakeholders work collaboratively to achieve the intended outcomes. Partnerships can be *school-based* (internally owned and led by the school) or *school-linked* (externally led, located outside of the school). It also ranges in complexity, from one-on-one (where a school collaborates with a single partner/organization), to more complex, multi-layered alliances. Partnerships are by definition *voluntary* in nature. In other words, those who are involved in it choose to do so voluntarily, and make a conscious decision to participate – they are not mandated or coerced to go into the partnership.

3. Elements of effective partnerships

Successful partnerships display a number of common characteristics. They have:

- A **unifying** purpose
- A critical number of **committed, independent** (becoming **interdependent**) members

- Participants who assume **specific responsibilities** and function as multiple leaders
- Connections at many interactive levels of the school
- A strong focus on collaboration that results in **synergistic** relationships

4. Some questions to consider before forming partnerships

- **Why** partner? - Consideration should be given as to WHY the individual/group/organization wants to partner with the school. What goals is the organization trying to achieve by partnering? If an organization is considering a partnership, then it should be explicit about the goals of the partnership and ensure that everyone in the organization and the school is aware of it.
- **Who** sits on the other side of the partnership? – The daily work of schools is characterized by numerous activities that demand the time and attention of the principals and teachers. They are also influenced by a number of often competing influences that may come from the education department, the school environment, or the community at large. All of these make schools complex environments to work in.

Schools also have their **own needs** and **goals**. External partners should thus make an effort to find out what these are and make sure that they are compatible with the goals of their own organizations. If the interests, needs and goals of the different groups are not aligned with each other, then the partnership is likely to experience difficulties.

- **What** are the levels of “*readiness*” for partnering? – Partnering takes time, energy and commitment – these are important human resources that are normally demanded over and above the essential activities that individuals are already doing in organizations. Before partnering, it is important to be clear about what this will mean for members of the group/organization who will be involved in the activities. It is also good to try and get some information on the background or context of the school. This information could come from the district or from a visit/s to the school. When visiting a school, check to see if the school has a sense of order. Are the learners in classes when they should be? Are the teachers teaching them? These are all signs that the school is focused on “*time on task*” and that the school places a high priority on teaching and learning. A school that understands and is focused on its core functions is one that will benefit the most from a partnership. Also check to see if the

school has a welcoming atmosphere, where outsiders are made to feel at ease – this is important to gauge whether the school is ready for collaboration.

- **Who** is the key person/s to explore the initiative or the idea of a partnership with? – The school principal is the most important person in this regard. S/he can either be a great champion of the partnership or a gatekeeper who will frustrate the partners and dilute the goals of the partnership. It will be important to get his/her buy-in and support from the beginning of the partnership. The principal, on the other hand, will have to sell the idea to the School Management Team (SMT), the School Governing Body (SGB), the teachers, the learners, and even the parents. The principal also ensures that the partnership activities are integrated into the operational plans of the school – in other words, all the activities are planned for in advance, everybody at the school know about it and understand how these are linked to the improvement goals of the school. In far too many cases, good initiatives fizzle out because they are not integrated in the school's operational plans – they float on the periphery of the organization and are not given the necessary time and attention required for effective implementation and success.

5. Things to remember when starting partnerships

One of the first things to do when setting out on the partnership is to be clear about **expectations**. What will be required of the partners in implementing the activities? What are the roles and responsibilities and who will play these roles? What kind of commitment will be required in terms of time, resources etc.? Expectations about what can be achieved should be **realistic** and made **explicit** upfront.

Effective partnerships also have a measure of **flexibility** built into them. Conditions at schools are often fluid due to external influences that are beyond the control of the school. Partners should be sensitive to this and cooperate with the school when changes to schedules and activities are required.

Partners should also be aware of the power dynamics that reside in any relationship. If schools are always seen as needy, dependent, and helpless, then it is tempting to adopt the mindset that we (as the partner/s), must go in to **fix** the problem or provide solutions from the outside. This approach locates the *power for change* within the realm of the external partner, where schools are regarded as helpless victims of their circumstances and are incapable of actively participating in resolving their challenges. This approach can also lead to **dependency** (as opposed to **interdependency**), which ultimately causes resentment and even resistance to collaboration from within the school.

A more effective approach to partnering should be “*asset-based*” – in other words, attention should be placed on the strengths and capacities that already exist in the school and community, and these should be used as the basis for achieving the goals of the partnership. An asset-based approach to partnering is also underpinned by reciprocal relationships, where there is *give-and-take* between all the stakeholders and where agency and empowerment is developed at the level of the school and community.

Lastly, it is important in any partnership to have a clear idea about **what** the partners are trying to achieve, **how** they would like to achieve it, and **when** they would like to achieve it. Indicators to measure progress must be identified and agreed upon from the outset of the partnership. Partnership meetings should not only focus on the implementation of the activities, but should also involve reflecting on what the goals are and how these are being achieved.

6. Stumbling blocks to effective partnerships

The following challenges or obstacles to partnering should be kept in mind throughout the duration of the partnership:

- **Illusion of consensus** – In the excitement to start the partnership, participants may reach agreement prematurely, ignoring issues of complexity, core values, and vision of the partnership.
- Failure to negotiate **a common working vocabulary** – Constant communication is key to effective partnerships and a common working vocabulary should be developed, especially in cases where the partners come from different disciplinary fields.
- Conflict over **status** – Asymmetrical power relations can cause individuals to focus more on personal status rather than the goals of the partnership.
- Group **too large** – Initiatives that involve multiple partners are often difficult to manage. This can also inhibit creativity or create communication problems between the partners.
- Neglecting the need for a **designated leader** – There needs to be clarity about *who* will lead the partnership from the beginning. In the absence of clear leadership responsibilities, it is likely that there will be competition between the different groups to take the lead, which in turn can lead to tensions and conflict in the relationship.

- Failing to **involve** learners, parents, and teachers – In any partnership, consultation, buy-in, and ownership remain essential elements that will contribute to its success.
- **Tension** between the **internal needs** of one's own organization, and the needs of the collaborative partnership – There has to be a balanced approach to managing these tensions.
- Spending **too much time and energy** on the partnership – When partnership activities detract from the core work of the organization or the school (which is teaching and learning), then questions should be raised about the amount of time being spent on the partnership.

7. Conclusion

Within the South African educational sector there are many organizations carrying out important and impactful work in and around schools to support the holistic development of learners. Their contributions are important and necessary. However, in too many cases, the work of these organizations sits on the periphery of the school's activities, and are not integrated into its core operational plans or that of the circuit and district. In situations like these, the effects of programmatic interventions become diluted, and the sustainability of the work is affected. In order to improve the quality and impact of educational programmes, it is imperative that high-quality innovative and collaborative relationships between schools and organizations are built and sustained to provide a coherent system of support for children and young people in South Africa.

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