Building Successful Partnerships Between Higher Education and Community Schools

BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY | COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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Overview and Background

Community schools are a local engagement strategy (rather than a program) with an integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities that lead to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Community schools are responsive to the unique needs of each community.

The **University-Assisted Community School** approach supports institutions of higher education, school districts, and community leaders in developing successful partnerships to help youth, families, and communities thrive. This toolkit provides information and examples about how to mobilize the vast resources of universities and colleges.

> " The fate of universities, their local communities, and cities are *intertwined*. "

-Ira Harkavy, Netter Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania

Overview and Background

University-assisted community schools:

- Are a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources, including higher education

- Create hubs to connect people and initiatives (in-person, hybrid, or virtual)

- Expand opportunities, supports, and services for children, families, and the community

- Are democratic, antiracist, justice- and equity-seeking institutions
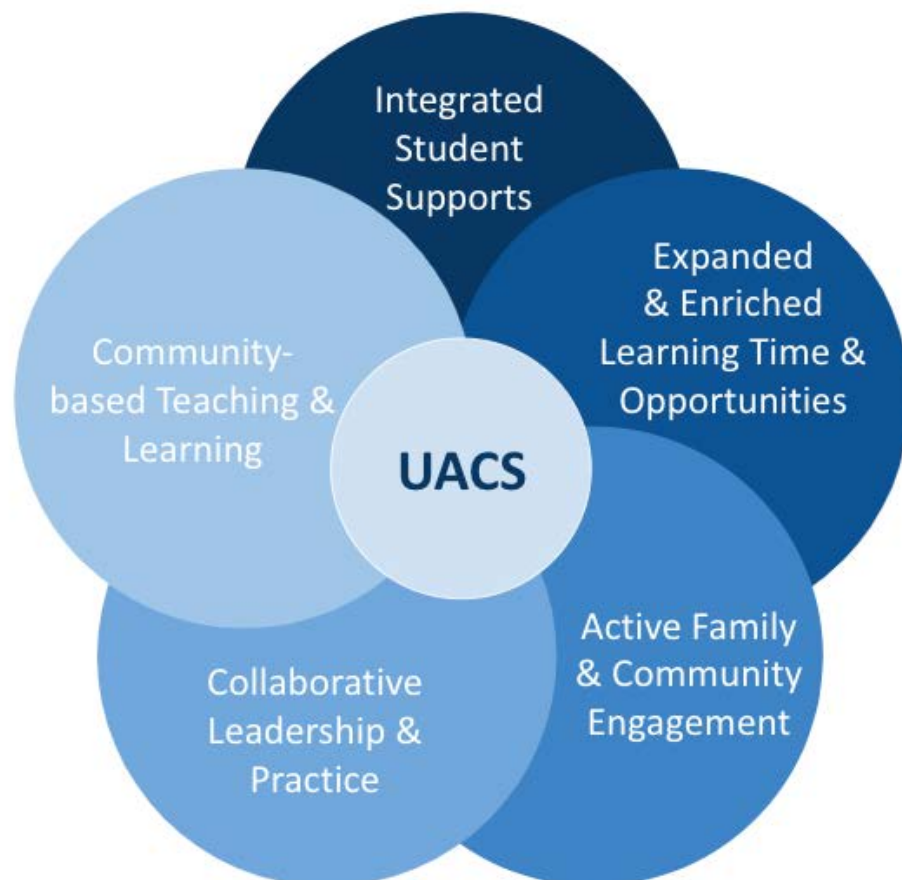
Ten Tips for Building Successful Partnerships

1 **Develop a SHARED VISION**

Partnerships must be grounded in a clear, cohesive vision.

- Discuss the purpose of partnering in terms of mutual benefits and desired outcomes to help guide the shared vision

- Create or analyze a needs assessment together to identify specific youth, family, and community priorities to serve with the partnership

- Record the shared vision in a partnership agreement and renew or update the vision annually

Promising Practice: Collaboration by Design

A school district and a local college each have a need around family engagement. The district wants to increase engagement and social work students at the college need to develop family engagement competencies in their field placements. Together, they develop a shared vision to improve the lives of youth and families through a mutual focus on family engagement strategies.

2

Emphasize Community Schools as an EQUITY STRATEGY

Equity is a priority for higher education.

- Consider how to leverage groups and programs offered at area institutions – who is already doing work around equity?

- Connect with students who may not have access to insights and information regarding pathways to higher education

- Build relationships with communities that have been historically marginalized, to understand needs and priorities in your area

- Emphasize how community schools elevate voices, assets, and needs of people with diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives

Promising Practice: Meaningful Family Engagement

A city in New York's Southern Tier has developed an intentional, people-centered process that guides family engagement work. Creating relationships with families and learning about them from an asset-based mindset helps to ensure that initiatives and services are developed with an equity lens.

3 Highlight MUTUAL BENEFITS

High-impact, skill-rich environments for learning, equity strategies, and faculty research agendas can serve as a foundation for partnerships.

- Explore service learning or community engaged learning coursework

- Many scholarships require community engaged opportunities

- High-stakes funding often requires community engagement, and funders appreciate public education collaborating with higher education

Promising Practice: Collaborative Partnerships

Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement works to align college student internships with school needs. They assess college students' preferred experiences and professional interests and match those to priorities identified by schools, benefitting both the college students and school community.

Did you know?

Individually, each of the four pillars of Community Schools positively impacts student outcomes. When all pillars are applied and well-implemented, their impact on schools, teachers, students, and families is multiplied (Medley & Darling-Hammond, 2018).

4 Identify CHAMPIONS

There are champions in every organization. Look for motivated colleagues within your network, learn about what energizes people, and connect around common goals.

- Start with relevant and connected departments or colleges: Civic Engagement, Education, Children & Families, and Health

- Find community leaders who also work in higher education (faculty and staff)

- Foster relationships with faculty and staff who have a passion for community work or research

Promising Practice: Community Connections

An assistant professor with research interests in STEM identity and makers spaces has become a champion in local rural middle schools (grades 6-8). They are leveraging coursework with college students to provide expanded learning opportunities for students in younger grades, thoughtfully braiding interests and offerings.

Did you know?
University students who become informal educators and mentor youth have been shown to increase adolescents' interest and engagement in STEM (Ko et al., 2018).

5 Identify Areas of ALIGNMENT

Identify areas within higher education that likely meet a need within a school district.

- Strategize projects with mutually beneficial components such as with social work, teacher, and counselor preparation programs

- Utilize findings from school needs assessments to discover areas where higher education resources may be relevant and helpful

- Review resources to coordinate common language and initiatives (e.g., school strategic plan, comprehensive list of support services)
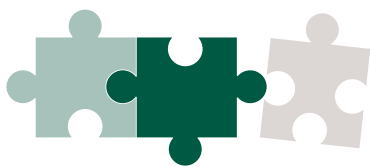
## Promising Practice: Alignment Across Programs

Binghamton University social work students are trained to work through a strength-based perspective. Schools in Broome County align social work training with a "Keeping It Positive" program, that recognizes positive behavior and incorporates language and themes into components of family engagement. This strategy provides a clinically rich experience for social work students, fosters an inclusive climate within the school building, and creates opportunities to bridge home and school environments.

6 Use an EXPANDED TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT Framework

An expanded tiered system of support framework helps educators provide academic and behavioral strategies for students with varying needs.

- "Community schools have the channels in place to accurately identify the needs and hopes of the school community, and then to triage those needs." (Long, 2020)

- Consider higher education resources that may be adaptable or suitable for each tier (e.g., universal supports, individual services such as tutoring)

Tier 3

Tier 2

Tier 1
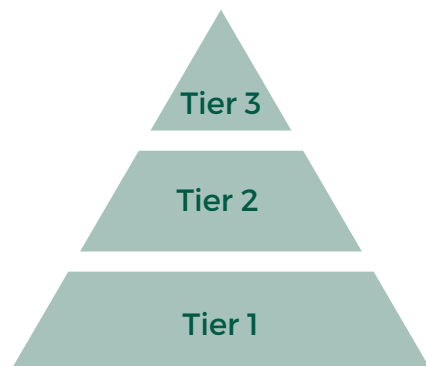
Promising Practice: Assess and Address Needs

The Covid-19 pandemic made it apparent that there is a digital divide across communities. Distributing computers to all families was not a feasible solution, because some homes lacked internet access. Relationships with parents helped identify broad needs versus acute needs. Community schools were able to triage challenges and direct families to services like rent relief, employment opportunities, or internet services. Without meaningful connections, these needs would have remained unknown and unmet.
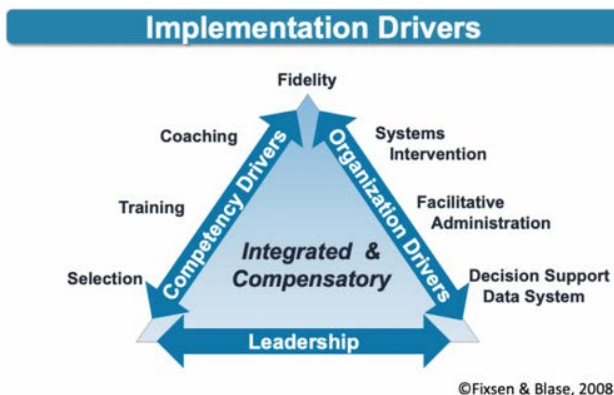
7 Utilize IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE

Focus on building internal capacity, systems, and processes.

- Analyze your own organization to understand strengths and gaps in capacity

- Use existing implementation tools and resources, such as the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)

- Use implementation science to guide sustainability planning

Source: National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)

Resource Spotlight: National Implementation Research Network

Implementation Drivers facilitate the success of initiatives. Capacity around competency, organization, and leadership are the universal features that must be present among successfully implemented programs and practices. Grounding implementation in these three core areas is necessary to initiate and support classroom, school, and district level change. This creates structure for planning and establishes pathways for sustainability.

8 Engage in CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

There is no one size fits all approach – plan to iterate.

- Work with partners to assess areas of strength and challenges, and revisit the data often

- Implement strong evaluation plans to drive improvement strategies
  - What do you want to learn from the data?
  - Create feedback loops with faculty research findings and your organization
  - Use students for data collection and analysis

Promising Practice: Mindful Reflection and Evaluation

At Binghamton University Community Schools (BUCS), social work interns are surveyed each year to provide feedback to BUCS, regarding their school site placements, and the Department of Social Work. This process has provided important insights, strengthened partnerships, and helped expand services to young people.

Did you know?

For every $1 invested in establishing a community school and hiring a site coordinator, the national average of return on investment (ROI) is $7.30. In New York's Connected Community Schools (Rome, Waterville, Dolgeville) the average ROI for a Community School Coordinator is $14 for every $1 invested. UFT's United Community Schools data shows a $100,000 investment in a Community School Director can bring in $600,000 in services and grants (NYSUT, 2021).

9 Foster **COLLABORATION**

Strong collaboration can build and strengthen social capital including relational trust.

- Set realistic expectations regarding timelines and outcomes

- Clarify roles and opportunities for partnership (e.g., funding streams)

- Develop sustainability plans and identify necessary support

- Establish clear lines of communication; understand partner goals and preferences

Promising Practice: Effective Communication

Communicating assets, challenges, and updates among partners is key to success. For example, Binghamton University students have struggled to travel to rural schools without their own transportation, creating a barrier to delivering services. This need was communicated and prioritized, as funding from a community partner was reallocated to support the expansion of transportation to rural schools. This level of transparency can help schools and partners to leverage available resources.

Ten Tips for Building Successful Partnerships

10 **Seek LEARNING NETWORKS and TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

Technical assistance helps to build the capacity of individuals, organizations, and institutions to achieve desired outcomes, from universal to individualized methods.

- Co-learn with existing networks around community schools (e.g., UACS National Network; NY/NJ UACS Learning Network; Regional Technical Assistance)

- Connect with local and regional education centers

- Share your projects broadly, no matter where you are in development

Resource Spotlight: NYSED Community Schools TAC

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) founded three Regional Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers to support the development and sustainability of effective community schools across New York state. The Technical Assistance Centers operate in three regions: New York City, Central/Western, and Eastern, providing free resources, professional development, guidance, and training. Offerings include but are not limited to targeted technical assistance, site visits, virtual events, and Communities of Practice.

Resources and Further Exploration

Please explore the resources below to support your planning and implementation:

- Binghamton University Community Schools
    - Community Schools Online Advanced Certificate
    - New York / New Jersey University-Assisted Community Schools - Archived Webinars
- Netter Center for Community Partnerships - University of Pennsylvania
- University-Assisted Community Schools National Network
- NYSED Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers
- Universities and Community Schools Journal
- UCLA Center for Community Schooling Journal
- New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) Community Schools Fact Sheet
- National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)
    - Implementation Stages
    - Implementation Drivers
    - Initiative Inventory

Citations and Contact Information

Citations and References

Information in this toolkit was supported by the following sources:

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