

Community-School Partnerships to Support Youth Development



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Next to the family, schools are one of the most influential developmental contexts that shape the life chances of youth. Over time, schools have increasingly shouldered the responsibility of promoting not only intellectual achievement but also civic, social and physical well-being (Cremin, 1977). Budget pressures and high stakes testing have had a dual effect—narrowing the types of supports available to youth at school (e.g. cuts to arts and sports programs), but also magnifying the need to address nonschool factors that shape academic success. Schools thus have a stake in building relationships with youth-serving community-based organizations, and those organizations often turn to schools for access to young people and linkages to school-based service providers.

The influence on youth of schools and communities—working independently or in partnership—raises important questions. How can schools and community groups work strategically to promote changes that meet youth needs? What form do existing interactions take? What benefits and challenges does the interaction pose for schools and their potential community partners? How and why should public and private funders do more to promote partnerships between schools and community-based organizations?

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About the REACH Issue Brief Series

In 2006, Sierra Health Foundation began the REACH youth development program, committing \$8 million to support the healthy development of youth in the Greater Sacramento, California, region. As a centerpiece of the larger program, seven communities in the region were awarded grants from 2006 to 2010 to assess community conditions, build community capacity for change and implement strategies that increase meaningful supports and opportunities for youth. Coalition development and direct, meaningful engagement of youth are key REACH objectives. Committed to making REACH a learning opportunity, Sierra Health Foundation asked an evaluation team from the University of California, Davis to assess the outcomes of the program and to document lessons learned. This issue brief is one of a series developed to share outcomes and lessons on topics of interest. For more information on the REACH program, visit Sierra Health Foundation's web site, www.sierrahealth.org. For information on the evaluation, visit the UC Cooperative Extension California Communities Program web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/CCP/index.cfm>.

The REACH youth program provided a laboratory for learning related to these questions, providing suggestive (though not definitive) lessons and insights.¹ This issue brief examines school-community partnerships fostered by REACH, focusing on: 1) the nature of school involvement in REACH coalitions; 2) the substantive issues around which partnerships

have formed; 3) observed and perceived benefits associated with the partnerships, from both the school and coalition perspective; 4) challenges encountered; and 5) recommendations for developing partnerships.

1. Data cited in this study was collected as part of the larger evaluation study of the REACH Program. Data gathering strategies include observations of grantee and program-wide events, and interviews with youth and adult participants, as well as community members who are associated with the grantee coalitions. Targeted interviews with 12 school partners and coalition coordinators were conducted specifically for this study.



Youth and adult members of the West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition work together and with community organizations, such as schools, city government, neighborhood associations and nonprofits to promote policies, programs and planning that support youth.

The Participation of Schools in Community Coalitions

The seven REACH grantees differed significantly in their pre-existing relationships with schools. One grantee is a school district and took advantage of immediate access to students to involve high numbers of youth in REACH activities. Four grantees had existing school partnerships and were able to deepen and expand those using REACH funds. The remaining two grantees—one a healthcare provider and the other a family resource center—used REACH as an opportunity to build new relationships with schools. Most REACH coalitions worked with multiple schools, including elementary, middle and high schools, as well as alternative schools, school districts and county offices of education.

Our analysis of coalition attendance patterns finds that schools are the most heavily represented community sector, accounting for approximately one in four adult participants. However, the duration and consistency of participation by school personnel varies according to the role they play within the school, with three identifiable patterns.

Student Services Support Staff

The most deeply engaged school personnel in REACH coalitions have tended to be student support staff, including program directors, coordinators or other advocates who focus on social services. Examples include a Healthy Start coordinator, a director of Family Support Services and a school counselor. Participation in community partnerships is a regular part of how these individuals work, both to expand much needed services to students and families and to attract grant funds to supplement what can be provided via hard-pressed school budgets. In a majority of the seven communities, a portion of REACH funds went directly to support existing school programs. Some student services staff members are formal liaisons and regularly report to their school administrators on coalition developments. For coalitions, these school personnel represent valued long-term partners who often have been involved in the various phases of the program, including the initial application process, planning and implementation phases, and strategizing for post-program sustainability.

School Administrative Leaders

These allies—including principals, superintendents or other school site and district office administrators—are typically less engaged in the daily business of the coalitions, but many are keenly aware of the REACH program. They can be called on to allocate school resources or access campus facilities for specific purposes or events. In some cases, coalition leaders have made special efforts to showcase their ties to these individuals at public events, helping lend legitimacy to the coalition. In other cases, coalition community change strategies require the participation of these school leaders with the authority to represent the school perspective or to initiate specific changes within the schools.

Teachers

This group of allies has direct contact with youth and includes classroom teachers and teaching assistants. In general, they are not as formally engaged in the work of the coalition, because the nature of their work in schools is less flexible and because their focus is on what happens in the classroom. However, they are often a critical means for accessing young people and facilitating tasks,



With a focus on service learning, the Galt Area Youth Coalition provides opportunities for students to take what they learn in the classroom and apply it in the community, such as the Cosumnes River Preserve Visitor Center Landscape Project, shown here.

such as handing out and collecting permission slips for coalition outings, recommending potential youth participants and promoting coalition events. In one coalition, teachers have provided the adult supervision for youth leadership teams that meet during school hours.

The Substantive Focus of Community-School Partnerships

Coalitions and schools have teamed up to address a range of youth issues. For example:

- In Meadowview, the REACH coalition sought to increase graduation rates by supporting expansion of an existing parent-teacher home visit project, the creation of a parent university at a high school and action research by students on school concerns.
- In Rancho Cordova, school administrators worked collaboratively with youth to plan and facilitate focus groups and produced a video to increase awareness and discussion about youth safety in the community.
- El Dorado Hills provided youth leadership and small grants to school-based programs, including a counseling program at an area middle school that serves 40 to 75 youth per month.
- In South Sacramento, REACH funds supported a school-based peer mediation program that helped reduce violence, bullying and expulsions.
- In Woodland, the coalition—in collaboration with a school-based student club—produced a youth documentary on the issue of teen pregnancy.

- In Galt, REACH funds helped expand service learning opportunities, and a youth master plan process facilitated better linkages between the schools and city officials.
- In West Sacramento, the coalition sought to revive a local youth commission and to gain support for a youth position on the school board.

Partnering with Schools: What's in it for Coalitions?

Much of the existing literature on school and community partnerships focuses on what schools gain. Few studies describe how school-community partnerships advance the goals of the community organization or coalition. Four themes surfaced from the data collected on school and community partnerships in REACH: recruitment, legitimacy, networks and resources.

With a goal to influence policymakers, students from the Rancho Cordova Children, Youth and Family Collaborative went to the State Capitol to let their voices be heard about potential cuts to school budgets. Members of the coalition's Youth Advisory Council met with their elected officials to discuss why the issue was important to them.



Recruitment

Tapping connections with school personnel was the primary strategy coalitions used to recruit youth. Most REACH youth we interviewed said that they heard about the coalition through someone at school. In some cases, coalitions have been able to target vulnerable student populations, since schools, districts and county offices often have specialized programs and services designated for youth of different backgrounds. To a lesser extent, some schools have helped attract adult coalition members, such as parents and other advocates for youth.

Legitimacy and Networks

Schools and school personnel are often hubs around which community networks form. By partnering with schools, coalitions were able to access other youth-serving organizations. For some coalitions, particularly those that did not pre-exist REACH, associating with schools was a way to develop community legitimacy. Being able to refer to partnerships with schools gives the coalition credence as they attempt to enlist coalition partners, particularly those with a youth-serving focus.

Resources

Coalitions benefit by accessing school resources, including facilities, staff and data. School facilities have been used for various coalition activities, such as regular meeting space, youth art events and local political forums. Qualified teachers are essential when coalition projects require enlisting youth in for-credit activities, such as service learning and youth-led action research projects, dance classes and peer mediation programs. And since schools must regularly gather data related to a variety of student outcomes, coalitions have accessed this data to provide evidence of youth and community outcomes to existing or potential funders.



The Youth Action Team at Luther Burbank High School is a diverse group of students who meet regularly to research, identify and advocate for positive changes in their school. The team is supported by the Sacramento ACT Meadowview Partnership.

Participating in Community Coalitions: What's in it for Schools?

Educators realize that their efforts to provide a high-quality learning experience are influenced by factors such as unstable home environments, gang violence, limited access to healthcare, affordable housing and cultural/linguistic mismatch between school staffs and the families they serve. Yet schools lack the resources to address these challenges on their own, and many critical student support services are underfunded or absent altogether. By partnering with REACH coalitions, schools help build on local resources to fill these gaps and also provide meaningful civic engagement opportunities for students. Observations and interviews with school personnel suggest that the following are among the key benefits to schools from their participation in REACH coalitions:



All of the REACH coalitions incorporated community service projects and/or service learning into their work. Shown here are youth in El Dorado Hills engaged in a teen gardening project.

Implementing Youth Development Practices in Schools

REACH training and technical assistance emphasized the importance of meaningful youth engagement and adult-youth partnerships. In response, school-based service providers took steps to meaningfully engage youth as partners in their work. In Meadowview, the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Program enlisted youth in designing and developing the program's high school component. In South Sacramento, peer mediation programs in elementary, middle and high schools give youth responsibility for reducing the incidence of violence and bullying at school. In Woodland, an area continuation school developed its first student government with the assistance of the Woodland coalition.

Strengthening School-based Supports and Opportunities

Numerous opportunities have arisen for coalitions to align their vision of community change and youth development with school-based assets. In some cases, coalitions have provided fiscal support to programs that are underfunded, such as funds to hire a part-time middle school counselor in El Dorado Hills as part of that community's strategy to reduce drug and alcohol abuse. In other cases, coalitions have partnered with schools to receive significant new grants for on-site, after-school programs.

Promoting School Events and Services

Just as schools have promoted coalition events, coalitions have promoted school events. In some cases, coalition members have helped to staff school events and have helped advertise school events to audiences beyond the school campus. In addition, coalition parent engagement programs have been credited with increasing parent interest and involvement in their child's schooling, while decreasing the sense of cultural isolation and distrust that some parents—particularly recent immigrants—feel toward schools as institutions.

Challenges in Partnerships Between Coalition and Schools

In general, school partners and coalition coordinators reported more benefits than challenges. However, the REACH experience suggests that practitioners working on these partnerships can anticipate challenges like the following:

- **Youth Development Practice Versus Traditional School Culture.** The “script” of traditional classroom culture tends to be didactic and passive for youth, whereas the goals of the youth development field are focused on empowerment, critical thinking and active participation.

- **Sustaining REACH-funded School-based Programs.** In several cases, funding for school-based services were allocated with the understanding that schools would find ways to continue the services after the REACH funding ended, but this is dependent on school budgets that are in decline.
- **Deciding Where to Locate Interventions.** While schools and community organizations agree that problems such as safety, gang violence and substance abuse play out in both schools and communities, deciding how best to allocate resources to address these concerns can be challenging. School partners are often partial to interventions that take place on their campuses and community organizations often prefer community-based alternatives.

Conclusion: The Promise of Community-School Collaborations

Schools and community coalitions can be powerful allies in brokering community change for youth development. For public and private funders, REACH provides lessons that can inform future efforts to use the complementary assets of schools and community coalitions to expand youth supports and opportunities.

By working with schools, community efforts to improve youth conditions are anchored to a key community institution.

Key Recommendations:

- **Strengthen local networks.** Through partnerships, schools, youth-serving organizations and community coalitions can cultivate strong working relationships with one another.
- **Spread knowledge of youth development practices.** Youth development principles can be disseminated beyond the out-of-school-time context so that they increasingly shape the programs and services within schools, including classroom practices.

- **Align needs and assets.** Coalitions and schools can cooperate to identify community assets that can meet youth needs, particularly those like the arts, which are affected by school budget cuts, and can communicate opportunities to young people and their caretakers.
- **Coordinate efforts to understand youth experiences.** Coalitions and schools can pool resources to better understand how young people experience life in their communities. This can include analysis of existing data, as well as lifting up the voices and unique perspectives of youth regarding school and community concerns.
- **Advocate for youth.** By working together, schools gain partners to advocate for funding in the political arena, and community coalitions gain powerful institutional allies as they pursue more funding for youth development.

For More Information

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