

Partnerships for Thriving Neighborhoods
*Tasks and tools for sustaining community partnerships in a
Philadelphia Green Schools program.*

Brandon Robertson
Ecological Urbanism
MIT Fall 2015

Introduction

Communities throughout the country are realizing the potential of their schools as an invaluable resource to create thriving neighborhoods. This is not to place the full weight of this task on the schools themselves; rather, a thriving neighborhood is a collaborative effort that involves the full spectrum of community members. For this reason, many schools are partnering with individuals, local businesses and organizations, and local and federal agencies to foster education and to empower neighborhoods to thrive. While each program is specific to its context, most examples contain one or more components of place-based education, environmental education, green schools, or community schools. One common aspect between all of the programs is the reliance on partners; in the most successful cases, a wide network of diverse partnerships is established to enrich educational opportunities and to leverage resources to support community-driven growth.

The call for a Philadelphia Green Schools program as envisioned by MIT’s Ecological Urbanism seminar (2015) includes improved schoolyards, place-based education, and schools that are community hubs. The program takes influence from ongoing efforts within the city: namely the greening of schoolyards by the Philadelphia Water Department, the Community Design Collaborative, and other groups; as well as education reform and school initiatives underway by the School District of Philadelphia, The Philadelphia City Council, and the School Reform Commission. A critical element to such a model program depends on the ability of the abovementioned parties, as well as the many more not-mentioned and not yet engaged parties to partner together to coordinate efforts, share resources, and refine the program vision, which would result in a program that is greater than the sum of its parts.

This paper references existing literature as well as different school-partner programs across the country with the intention to extract critical tasks and tools related to these types of partnerships so that the relevant parties in Philadelphia may begin their shared work, maximize the outcomes of their efforts, and create thriving neighborhoods. The following material is organized into sections pertaining to the key principles with references to tools and cases when applicable. While the principles are listed in an order, this does not intend to suggest a chronological order that should necessarily be followed, as many of the practices are continuous, and some may already be underway amongst existing partners and ongoing efforts within Philadelphia.

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Coordinate a Planning Team and Process

Creating a thriving neighborhood takes the dedication of community members and a well thought out planning process to guide initial efforts. The Center for Community School Partnerships advocates bringing together a planning team as one of the initial steps in creating a school-linked community support and services program.¹ Such a planning team is responsible for aligning diverse goals into a broader yet specific vision, and coordinating the necessary partnerships to achieve those goals. A group with similar intentions is likely to exist in some form between existing partnerships whether it be the informal interaction between point-persons of two partners, or regularly scheduled meetings between a larger number of partners. In the context of the Philadelphia Green Schools vision this group should be composed of a diverse group of members who partner together and are representative of the larger community. It is important that the top-down initiatives are in alignment with the bottom-up desires to ensure that the forces shaping neighborhoods are community-driven; a diverse planning team can act as a platform that would ensure this.

While the specifics of the interactions between such a team would largely be influenced by the partners involved at any particular time, the general goals of the team would include working collaboratively to create a shared vision and creating an action plan with goals. In order to achieve this, it is important that each member understand all participants outside work as well as shared work, and that the responsibilities of all participants are understood.² There are likely to be many initial obstacles that need to be overcome when a diverse group of partners begin this type of work together, there also exist resources aimed at guiding this process. The Center for Community School Partnerships (CCSP) has created a toolkit outlining objectives, activities, and tools including sample agendas for collaborative community meetings and group exercises that a planning team can reference. As an example, the CCSP identifies the components of an effective meeting agenda, how to develop a meeting's purpose statement, and then further includes a framework for agendas depending on whether the group is likely to often have new members at the meetings, or whether all members meet regularly. A well-defined meeting agenda is one way that partners on a planning team can ensure that the most is being made of their effort.

RESOURCE:

The Center for Community School Partnership's "Beginning Steps" toolkit can be referenced at the following link:

<http://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/toolkit-section2.pdf>

¹ Center for Community School Partnerships at The University of California, Davis. "Beginning Steps." *UC Davis School of Education*. <http://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/toolkit-section2.pdf> (Accessed December 1, 2015).

² California School-Based Health Alliance. "Begin Your Shared Work." *CSBHC*. <http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/start-up-and-operations/partner-collaboration/begin-your-shared-wor/> (Accessed December 1, 2015).

Create a Shared Vision and Identify Measurable Goals

Partnerships should thoughtfully develop a clear vision that is reflective of and responsive to community needs and desires. The Coalition for Community Schools promotes identifying a clear vision and goals as a prerequisite for effective partnerships.³ A way in which partners may begin this process is to identify areas of overlap such as common interests and goals as well as each partner's available resources and needs. This will begin to inform how partners may best collaborate as well as clarify why the partnership exists. In the context of the Philadelphia Green Schools vision, partners should collaboratively identify desired outcomes for youth, families, the community, and environment. The structure of these processes should directly engage community members to ensure that the effects of the program are truly community-driven.⁴ An action that partners can take to facilitate this is to host an open community meeting where community members would work together to begin creating a shared vision. The Center for Community School Partnerships has outlined a sample "Visioning Activity" that begins with individual reflection on questions relating to values, beliefs, and thoughts on what the school-community could be. After this, individuals are partnered with other participants and continue to elaborate on and define such a program collaboratively. The benefit of this structure is that each individual is encouraged to establish and share his or her own ideas.

RESOURCE:

The Center for Community Partnership's Visioning Activity outline can be referenced at the following link:

<http://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/toolkit-section2.pdf>

Assess Efforts

Assessing the development and current efforts of partnerships is a key task that will identify successes and more importantly reveal areas in need of attention. In the context of the Philadelphia Green Schools vision, where there is a significant number of organizations whose work is in one way or another relevant to such a model program, it would be beneficial to begin assessing what partnerships currently exist, the existence or clarity of any organizational structure, and the coordination and linkage of supports and opportunities. The results of such assessments should strategically be translated into an action plan, where areas lacking in performance are addressed. The combination of planning, visioning and goal setting, and continued assessment is an important process to

³ Blank, Martin J.; Langford, Barbara Hanson. "Strengthening Partnerships: Community School Assessment Checklist." *Coalition for Community Schools*.
http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/strength_part_assessment.pdf (Accessed December 1, 2015).

⁴ Bruner, Charles; Chavez, Maria. "Getting to the Grassroots: Neighborhood Organizing and Mobilization." A Matter of Commitment- Community Collaboration Guidebook Series #6. NCSI Clearinghouse, 1997.

ensure the success of partnerships. The Coalition for Community Schools has created a series of “Community School Assessment Checklist(s)” that aim to act as a planning tool to inform the development of strategies to strengthen partnerships, coordinate available resources, and to identify potential funding sources.⁵ A successful Philadelphia Green Schools program would need to demonstrate the ability to coordinate each of these topics; assessments and checklists are an effective way to guide efforts.

RESOURCE:

The Coalition for Community Schools’ “Community School Assessment Checklist” can be referenced at the following link:

http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/strength_part_assessment.pdf

Strategically Cast a Wide Net

The most successful community and school partnership programs take advantage of a wide network of local partners that offer a diverse range of skills, services, facilities, funding, and opportunities. The Philadelphia Green Schools model program as envisioned would only be achievable if a wide range of community partners were established to provide both financial and programming support. A comparable partnership model to what would be required for a fully scaled Philadelphia Green Schools program is that of Chicago’s Community School Initiative (CSI), which is the largest community school system in the country and is managed by Chicago Public Schools. CSI is able to offer expanded learning opportunities and support services to students, family, and the community largely because of the program’s success in partnering schools with community organizations and agencies that are able to provide academic support, social and cultural enrichment, health and wellness services including emotional health, and family and community engagement activities.⁶ The Chicago Public School (CPS) district has adopted a lead agency model, in which lead agency partners often employ a full time resource coordinator at each school. The CPS initially coordinates and identifies a group of lead agencies, and then the school’s Principal chooses the agency they wish to work with. The lead agency will then often involve diverse community partners to meet the specific goals of the program.⁷ The program has been incorporated into 120 public schools; the program would not be able to function without a wide network of engaged partners.

⁵ Blank, Martin J., Langford, Barbara Hanson. “Strengthening Partnerships: Community School Assessment Checklist.” *Coalition for Community Schools*.
http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/strength_part_assessment.pdf (Accessed December 1, 2015).

⁶ Chicago Public Schools. “District Initiatives.” *Community Schools Initiative*.
<http://cps.edu/Programs/DistrictInitiatives/Pages/CommunitySchoolsInitiative.aspx> (Accessed December 23, 2015).

⁷ Coalition for Community Schools. “Chicago, IL: Building Communities of Community Schools- Deepening Scale-up.” *Coalition for Community Schools*.
http://www.communityschools.org/resources/chicago_il_building_communities.aspx. (Accessed December 23, 2015).

Formalize Partnerships

Once mutual partnerships have been established, partners should formalize the relationship with a Letter of Agreement or another appropriate contract. Such an agreement would clearly define the roles and responsibilities of both parties, and would hold each group accountable for their actions. Letters of Agreement or contracts would be necessary in a fully scaled Philadelphia Green Schools program, which would largely rely on the compliance and commitment of a large number of partners, and is especially critical considering that the partner organizations are likely to be responsible for providing some type of financial support or school support services, both of which potentially directly affect students.

Boost! is an organization that promotes wraparound support and services within New Haven public schools. One of the main goals of Boost! is to increase the accountability of organizations that provide support and services in order to ensure the success of the program. One way in which Boost! holds partners accountable is by requiring a detailed “Partnership Agreement.”⁸ The agreement is composed of sections covering scope of services, shared and independent roles and responsibilities, goals and purposes, and any financial requirements when applicable.

A similar use of contracts is demonstrated by the California School-Based Health Alliance (CSBHA). CSBHA is an organization that works to link students with health-related support services. Since the organization directly influence the physical and mental health and actively provides health care to students and families, they have created a more elaborate contract aimed at both holding partners accountable, but also to ensure students are provided with critical care. The Letter of Agreement that partners are held to outlines logistics, communication standards, integration requirements, contact information, and shared goals and objectives.⁹

While both of these contracts are specific to their respective programs, they both act as a useful template that can be referenced in the creation of a contract tailored to the needs of the Philadelphia Green Schools program. Since the envisioned program covers a broader range of topics (place-based education, greening schoolyards, schools as community hubs) than either of these examples, the program might find that different partnerships require different contracts. It may be that a contract exists pertaining to the greening of schoolyards that may involve the Philadelphia Water Department outlining maintenance requirements of any green infrastructure installed as a part of greening schoolyards; a different type of contract would likely be required between partners working on place-based education aspects of the program, as may eventually exist between Drexel or the University of Pennsylvania and the public schools implementing place-based education.

⁸ United Way of Greater New Haven. “Boost! Partnership Agreement” http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/New%20Haven%20MOU%20Template_Payment.pdf. (Accessed December 1, 2015).

⁹ California School-Based Health Alliance. “About School-Based Health Centers.” *CSBHA*. <http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/school-health-centers-in-ca/> (Accessed Dec. 23, 2015).

RESOURCES:

The Boost! partnership agreement template can be referenced at the following link:
<http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/New%20Haven%20MOU%20Template%20Payment.pdf>

The California School-Based Health Alliance “Letter of Agreement” template can be referenced at the following link:
<http://cshca.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Sample-School-SBHC-Letter-of-Agreement.pdf>

Document and Build Upon Progress (and Failures)

Documentation of progress and failures is a key task that a Philadelphia Green Schools program should regularly undertake. This process will be especially critical in the early stages of the program, since initial failures are likely to occur. By documentation and evaluation causes can be identified, adjustments made, and mistakes are resolved rather than repeated. On the other hand, documentation and evaluation of progress not only reveal the agents successfully at work allowing best-practices to be repeated, but will also strengthen the image of the program. Initial success stories are especially useful to increase momentum and gain community acceptance. Proper documentation is a necessary step in providing information to the diverse group of partners that would be involved in a Philadelphia Green Schools program. Further, partnerships that have been formalized in contracts, especially if funding is involved, will likely find documentation of progress and failures necessary, as some type of evaluation requirement is likely to be in place in order to reveal whether or not either partner has met terms agreed upon in the contract.

Through an understanding of the importance of documentation within a school-community partner program, the Center for Community Partnerships has created a “Measuring Progress and Evaluation Results” toolkit with the objective to help programs understand ways to document work, plan for evaluation, and measure progress across scales.¹⁰ The toolkit provides templates for simple evaluation techniques such as questionnaires, as well as criteria to consider if hiring an independent evaluator. A Philadelphia Green Schools program would likely benefit from simple evaluations that can be referenced to quickly make small noticeable adjustment, as well as be required to provide more elaborate and specific evaluations.

RESOURCE:

The Center for Community Partnerships’ “Measuring Progress and Evaluating Results” toolkit can be referenced at the following link:
<http://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/toolkit-section6.pdf>

¹⁰ Center for Community Partnerships at The University of California, Davis. “Measuring Progress and Evaluating Results.” UC Davis School of Education. <http://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/toolkit-section6.pdf> . (Accessed December 1, 2015).