SUMMARY

RE-IMAGINING OUR SCHOOLS: Creating a Strategic Framework for School-Community Collaborations

upstart
Champions for Children and Youth
UpStart works with community leaders from a wide variety of sectors including the public and separate school systems, health care, the police, post-secondary educational institutions, non-profit organizations, business and government. UpStart works collaboratively on issues that no one organization could address on its own, and focuses on the underlying causes of the problems that negatively influence our children and youth.
1. School-Community Collaborations Benefit Everyone

Children and Families

- Keeps vulnerable children in mainstream schooling.
- Increases family engagement.
- Improves attendance and educational attainment.
- Improves employment prospects, reduces drug abuse, reduces incidence of teen pregnancy, reduces crime, and improves family health.

Educators

- Offers new opportunities to improve school functioning and enhance student success.
- Provides additional resources to address the complex issues that children and their families struggle with, which can impact school environments and educational attainment.
- Ensures the availability of appropriate professional expertise and resources for children, so that educators can better focus on their mission and role.
- Reduces the stress and liability associated with being the sole provider of mental health care for children and youth in school.
- Recognizes that community issues such as poverty, violence, family stability, and substance abuse impact school performance and student results.
Communities

- Addresses concerns about the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies that result from fragmented, scattered and difficult to access service systems.
- Ensures that publicly-funded community-based facilities are utilized to their full potential, which is critical given the increasing demand for community space and rising construction costs.
- Offers new opportunities for volunteer and community engagement.
- Provides a vital platform for cost-effective, local strategies to develop community capacity and deliver programming.

Government Ministries

- Supports early intervention, prevention and community-based health strategies.
- Creates opportunities for improved physical and mental health.
- Enhances efforts to improve community spirit and cultural growth.
- Improves accessibility of programs and supports for new immigrant groups.
- Supports initiatives to build and sustain safe communities.

A lack of clarity about the specific roles of educators and their potential community partners is often frustrating.

2. School-Community Collaborations Aren’t Perfect

Definitions Matter

- There are numerous terms and models of school-community collaboration (e.g., co-located or linked schools, full-service or whole schools, and inclusive schools). Without the clarity of a definition, people could be talking at cross purposes.
- A lack of understanding about the specific roles of educators and their potential community partners is often frustrating.
- All stakeholders involved in school-community collaborations require clear agreement about the educational goals and the scope and intent of the collaboration.

Professionals Need Training

- Learning to work across disciplines with a variety of professional and community groups, developing a shared vision, establishing trust, and approaching the use of authority with some flexibility are common issues across most jurisdictions.
- Alberta informants highlighted concerns in several areas, including insufficient training and experience in collaborative and inclusive strategies, lack of trust, poor communication, territoriality, insensitivity to the power differential between professionals and communities, and the proliferation of uncoordinated requests to collaborate in schools.

Flavour of the Month is Limiting

- There is some apprehension that decisions that influence what programs are introduced in schools are based on personal connectedness or program familiarity, rather than on evidence of impact or effectiveness in addressing educational needs and community goals. Without exception, informants highlighted the need for clear guidelines to better determine how, when and with whom to link and partner.
3. Key Elements Must Exist for an Effective Strategic Framework

There are a number of common elements found among the jurisdictions that have (or are developing) a strategic framework to enhance and support better school-community collaborations. A review of the approaches in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, the United Kingdom and the United States suggest nine promising practices.

Valuing of School-Community Collaborations
Each jurisdiction is committed to school-community collaboration because they believe that such collaborations are an essential element in meeting the needs of children and their communities. These commitments are clearly stated in each department of education business plan and, in some cases, the overall government business plan.

Inter-governmental Structures
Throughout the education system, at the ministry, regional and local levels, structures are mandated that support inter-ministry and inter-sectorial planning.

Budget Allocations
Budget commitments from a number of departments, not just the department of education (e.g. health, children and youth, mental health) are allocated to support school-community collaborations.

Outcome Measurements
There are clear plans to measure outcomes, an appreciation for the importance of benchmarks, a commitment to the collection and sharing of aggregate data at the local and provincial (state) level, and support for research and the dissemination of promising practices.

Data Sharing
There is an acknowledgement that planning for children and youth requires up-to-date information shared across sectors (education, health, social services).

Consumer Voice
In each system, mechanisms for the direct input of parents and students have been created. In some, a parent’s right to be involved in school-based volunteer activities has been legislated.
Local Teams
Either within schools or at a divisional level, there are teams of parents, students, educators, community service providers, and sometimes business representatives that help identify student and family needs within the context of the community. Professionally staffed and resourced, these teams provide advice to the school and the division on potential collaborative activities.

Ministry and Local Leadership
Each jurisdiction recognizes that school-community collaborations succeed when there are incentives and leadership at both the departmental and individual school levels.

The Link to Child and Youth Agendas
Developing and supporting enhanced school-community partnerships is often considered a valuable component and an integral strategy to support broader provincial / national agendas for children and youth. This linkage to a broader agenda seems critical to galvanizing and maintaining the support of numerous stakeholders and improving the likelihood that school-community collaborations are sustained over time.

4. Alberta Education Believes School-Community Collaborations are Essential

Alberta Education publications make frequent reference to the essential values of school-community collaborations such as partnership, collaboration, and stakeholder involvement. There is also an historical commitment to community consultation in our province.

References to school-community collaborations were found in documents published by Alberta Education, including the department’s mission statement and mandate letter, the 2008-2011 business plan, the Province of Alberta’s School Act, any applicable Bills and Motions from 2006-08, Minister Hancock’s documented speeches, the Alberta Initiative to School Improvement (AISI) Program, and recent news releases. Specific references to the values or structures that might support community collaborations, the identification of the partnerships as a priority and any structures or policy framework that would support greater school-community collaborations were identified.
5. Current Strategies of Alberta Education and Promising Practices from Other Jurisdictions

In general terms, the stated strategies of Alberta Education are fairly well aligned with the common elements found in the strategic frameworks adopted in other jurisdictions. A short review of current strategies in relation to the nine promising practices identified above, suggests the following:

Valuing of School-Community Collaborations
Alberta Education clearly identifies their support for collaboration, consultation, and/or partnership in their publications, including their mission statement, principles, mandate letter, accountability statements, and news releases. The extent to which actual systems, structures and incentives support and value these collaborative activities is less clear.

Inter-governmental Structures
Alberta Education has been mandated to partner with the Ministries of Advanced Education and Technology and Justice and the Attorney General, and is working with Alberta Children and Youth Services and Alberta Health and Wellness. This type of cross-ministry support or inter-sectoral planning is not mandated by Alberta Education at other levels of the education system, nor is there any linkage to a shared agenda or common responsibility for improving child and youth outcomes. There is no indication that Alberta’s Ministry of Infrastructure bases facility decisions on the need to support community collaboration or access to schools.

Budget Allocations
Alberta Education provides AISI funds “encouraging teachers, parents, and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative and creative initiatives based upon local needs and circumstances”. The extent to which these resources have directly enhanced school-community collaboration, or have provided staff with the requisite skills to partner in communities, is unclear. There remains no definition or criteria of what constitutes sound collaborative practice or funding to support its development. The use of schools during non-school hours remains prohibitive in many communities due to insurance, rental and caretaking costs, while other jurisdictions have instigated strategies to overcome these barriers (e.g. indemnifying any community group using a school site).

Outcome Measurements
Alberta Education does require local school jurisdictions to report on common satisfaction and knowledge acquisition measures. Unfortunately, the responses of pertinent sub-populations are not broken out for relevant feedback on satisfaction levels with their involvement in school jurisdictions and the impact that the educational system is having on them and their families.
Data Sharing
One of Alberta Education’s goals is to “implement a provincial approach that will increase efficiency, effectiveness and economies of scale in managing student information across the education system”. Sharing of educational data at an aggregate community level across other sectors (e.g., health, children’s services) would advance community planning and decision making.

Consumer Voice
Alberta has historically relied upon the input of stakeholders in deciding the future priorities and direction of education in Alberta. Recent announcements about planned consultations on special education and the system as a whole support this tradition. While consumer and community input at a provincial level is essential, Alberta has not mandated nor supported the development of community-level plans between schools and community partners to address student, family and community needs.

Local Teams
Alberta Education does not mandate nor fund the development or functioning of local teams that would utilize community members and resources to address the needs of children.

Ministry and Local Leadership
Alberta Education has shown leadership in articulating their commitment to collaborations and participation with all stakeholders. However, they have left the decision of how, when, and under what conditions these collaborations occur to individual school jurisdictions. In the absence of clear direction, systemic incentives, rewards, and some forms of structural and financial support, the capacities and abilities of schools and communities to effectively collaborate remains a ‘hit and miss’ proposition. Similarly, opportunities for sharing new knowledge, peer leadership development, and the identification of innovative promising practices are lost. Without more tangible and localized commitments to the development and enhancement of community collaborations, public schools and their ability to build valuable human and social capital will continue to be underutilized.

A Provincial Agenda
The Government of Alberta has not developed a provincial agenda for children and youth that frames the allocation of resources, establishes targets, reduces service gaps and focuses efforts across provincial departments. Other jurisdictions that have taken this step on an identified issue, such as poverty reduction or child and youth achievement, have seen dramatic results that been acknowledged nationally and internationally. More facilities open to the community and effective school-community collaborations would be essential elements and key strategies if a more ambitious shared agenda were to be developed for Alberta’s children, youth and families.

It is important to note that there are many stellar examples of effective school-community collaborations across Alberta that have flourished and succeeded. There may be opportunities to better capture, share and magnify these examples throughout the system.

“This approach, is the road to building safer communities in Alberta” - Rick Hanson, Calgary Chief of Police
6. Strategies and Opportunities for Consideration by Alberta Education

- Many informants expressed a desire for more cross-sectorial and inter-departmental planning at the provincial, division and community levels, suggesting that several departments should be involved in developing joint end statements, joint accountability measures, and joint implementation plans that reflect a shared commitment to a provincial agenda to improve outcomes for children and youth.

- There are many concerns regarding the current inefficient use of school space as a public and/or community asset, despite the best efforts of local boards. On-going and unaddressed issues with insurance coverage, rental fees and caretaking costs are seen as unreasonable financial barriers faced by community members trying to access school facilities for child, youth and family programming. Amending the design of new schools to better support community engagement was consistently identified as a priority for the Government of Alberta.

- Interviewees agreed that there should be salaried staff at the division level to facilitate school-community collaborations. Financial support and staff training should be shared by the departments concerned with child and youth outcomes (e.g. education, health, children and youth, justice, and recreation).

- To support community-level planning, it was suggested that the Government of Alberta facilitate public access to data ensuring all public agencies be mandated to provide disaggregate data to the public on an array of indicators, while maintaining the confidentiality of the individual sources.

- Enhanced and focussed training, development of best practice models, peer mentorship and criteria for the development of effective, evidence-based initiatives were consistently identified as opportunities to improve school-community collaborations.

There are numerous practical, and even visionary, ways for Alberta Education to take a more active role in supporting school-community collaborations, including the strategies and opportunities listed above. Ideally linked to a shared inter-ministerial commitment to the success of children and youth, there remain leadership opportunities and methods by which Alberta Education can begin to advance a commitment to better developing, sustaining and recognizing the value of school-community collaborations.
SUMMARY and Recommendations

The educational experiences of many children are compromised by health, social, and economic factors that require services beyond what any school in isolation can provide. These factors can impede academic success and are linked to negative long-term outcomes. To address these issues, re-imagining our schools to fully embrace parental and community partnerships is necessary. Evidence and commitments made in other jurisdictions demonstrate how collaborative work at a school level has become an essential educational reform.

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In an effort to encourage and support the implementation of school-community collaborations in Alberta, Alberta Education should:

1. **Provide systemic infrastructure to enhance school-community collaborations**
   - Support family engagement and community and divisional planning with multiple stakeholders.
   - Create technological support for joint data collection and sharing.
   - Report disaggregated education and health data at community, divisional, and provincial levels.
   - Develop “fast-track” review panels to assist with administrative issues.
   - Provide training and personnel at the local level to support school-community collaborations.
   - Enhance the development of inclusive schools and curriculum.
   - Ensure recognition awards such as the Minister’s Education Leadership Recognition Awards (MELRA) reflect a commitment to school-community collaborations.

2. **Ensure public assets and school infrastructure are child and community-focused**
   - Ensure new schools are built to encourage joint school and community usage.
   - Provide capital support to renovate existing schools to facilitate community usage.
   - Address liability, rental, and caretaker costs of school facilities for community groups.

3. **Strengthen community-focused planning**
   - Create school-based resource coordination teams to map, coordinate, and connect resources inside and outside of schools.
   - Help schools and communities identify the “feeder issues” that contribute to a lack of school success and the community organizations that could make a difference in addressing those issues.
   - Support research into the development of criteria for determining appropriate school-community collaborations.

4. **Support the development of a provincial child and youth agenda**
   - Frame the nature and scope of interventions for children and their families.
   - Align and bridge policy across departments to reflect this agenda.
   - Establish inter-departmental funding structures to support this agenda.
   - Commit to a “whole school” model of school-community collaboration as a central strategy.
   - Ensure schools and facilities are designed as a shared platform to support this agenda.
A United Way initiative directed by community leaders.