

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

– Margaret Mead

**S**chools, families and communities are major institutions that socialize and educate children. Student success in academics and character and citizenship are of interest to each institution and are best achieved through cooperative action and support. Factors such as changing family demographics, workplace demands and growing student diversity create the need for supportive learning environments that move beyond what families and schools can do on their own.

School–community partnerships are connections between schools and community individuals, organizations or businesses to directly or indirectly promote students’ social, emotional, physical or intellectual development.<sup>1</sup> These partnerships take many forms, from individuals working together to a collective of community groups forming partnerships with entire school divisions.

Creating a community of caring requires a comprehensive approach to partnerships. A systematic or comprehensive approach to developing community partnerships builds on ideas for involving parents in the previous chapter. It recognizes that schools are part of larger communities, and that learning happens in and beyond the school environment. Much of what is learned is affected by influences outside classrooms. The likelihood that students adopt and maintain positive behaviours increases with consistent messages from multiple sources.

A comprehensive approach also provides a framework that encourages schools, parents and communities to work toward shared goals. Communities expect schools and families to prepare students to become healthy, productive citizens. Communities also have a responsibility, and often a desire, to join schools and families in achieving this goal.



### Benefits of Community Partnerships

Successful partnerships contribute to lasting school improvement through work centred on supporting student achievement. Community partnerships connect character and citizenship education to real-life issues and community concerns, promoting commitment to positive choices and behaviours. Community partners support character and citizenship education through services that create caring environments or promote positive values, such as helping others in need. Community partnerships also enhance community and school policies, programs and structures.

Community partnerships provide a context for increasing success and building leadership capacity for everyone involved. Partnerships encourage groups to align efforts to achieve mutual goals, which benefits all partners. Potential benefits could include the following.

- Service agencies receive support resulting in efficient delivery of services.
- Government agencies have a framework for planning and policy development that enables them to both consider the big picture and respond to local needs and concerns.
- Families, volunteers and community groups benefit from coordination of services, programs and activities that are cost-effective and reap long-term rewards for youth.
- Students benefit from working with community service agencies and organizations on tasks or projects. These can develop a sense of community and purpose, and a real understanding of local needs and issues. Students may address specific curricular outcomes by going into the community to gather information or provide a service.

### Action Planning for Community Partnerships

Creating community partnerships involves identifying stakeholders, establishing goals, and building consensus and leadership capacity. Conducting a specific needs assessment of community partnerships can help to identify areas that need strengthening. Mapping existing community resources to identify duplications and gaps in service, and then prioritizing program needs, will provide information for making decisions about new initiatives, or ways to strengthen or modify existing efforts to support the school's core values. Once decisions are made, the group begins planning for implementation, including analyzing potential barriers, developing strategies to overcome challenges and linking to the school's three-year plan. As part of this planning, the team develops a specific one-year action plan outlining steps to achieve goals, and identify roles and responsibilities, target dates and ways to monitor feedback for ongoing assessment and evaluation of results.

## Identifying Potential Community Partners

The term “community” is not limited to specific geographic boundaries or neighbourhoods; it refers more to the ‘social interactions’ that can occur within or beyond local boundaries.

Potential community partners include:<sup>2</sup>

- **Businesses/Corporations:** Local businesses, national corporations and franchises
- **Universities and Educational Institutions:** Colleges and universities, high schools and other educational institutions
- **Health Care Organizations:** Regional health care centres, hospitals, mental health facilities, health departments, health foundations and associations
- **Government Agencies:** Fire departments, police departments, chambers of commerce, city councils and other municipal, provincial and federal government agencies and departments
- **National Service and Volunteer Organizations:** Clubs such as Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Shriners, Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts/Guides, 4-H, YMCA, United Way, Legion, Big Brothers/Sisters
- **Faith-based Organizations:** Churches, mosques, synagogues, other religious organizations and faith-based charities
- **Media Organizations:** local newspapers, radio and television stations
- **Senior Citizens Organizations:** Senior centres, nursing homes, and senior volunteer and service organizations
- **Cultural and Recreational Institutions:** Zoos, museums, libraries, recreational centres, art galleries, theatres
- **Other Community Organizations:** Fraternities, sororities, foundations, community leagues, sports associations, and political, alumni and local service organizations
- **International Agencies/Organizations:** UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, Red Cross
- **Community Individuals:** Individual volunteers from the local community.

Faith-based schools may also consider:

- diocese
- Bishop’s Office
- other religious groups.

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### Establishing a Focus for Partnerships

The focus for community partnership activities may vary. The following chart identifies four areas of focus and lists sample activities for each area.<sup>3</sup> These focus areas are interrelated and together provide a sample model for organizing partnership activities that include all stakeholders and provide mutual benefits for all involved.

#### Focus Areas and Examples of School–Community Partnership Activities

Student Centred	Family Centred	School Centred	Community Centred
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• scholarships</li><li>• student trips</li><li>• tutors</li><li>• mentors</li><li>• job shadowing</li><li>• student awards and incentives</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• parent workshops</li><li>• family fun nights</li><li>• adult education classes</li><li>• parent incentives and rewards</li><li>• referrals and links to community services</li><li>• counselling</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• equipment and materials donations</li><li>• beautification and repair</li><li>• teacher incentives and awards</li><li>• funds for school events and programs</li><li>• office and classroom assistance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• community beautification</li><li>• student exhibits and performances</li><li>• charity events</li><li>• outreach activities</li></ul>

### Building Consensus and Capacity

In successful school–community partnerships, partners have common goals linking character and citizenship education with improved student achievement. An effective team uses collaborative skills, inclusive decision-making structures, and time together for reflection and evaluation. As the team grows in leadership capacity, varying the contributions of all involved generates enthusiasm and commitment to action. Each stakeholder contributes energy and wisdom to a school; collectively these voices build sustainable school improvement.

### Assessing Needs

Community partnerships begin with assessment of the school’s current situation and context of unique concerns and priorities. Needs, issues and concerns of students and families vary depending on the ages of the student population, geographic location, community demographics and cultures, and social climate of the school and community.

A rating scale such as the one on the following page helps school action teams identify current strengths and areas for growth.<sup>4</sup>

Our school:	Rating				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1. provides brochures or references specifically for parents and students that include information on community services, programs and agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. supports families in locating and using community resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. works with local businesses, industries, libraries, parks, museums and other organizations to enhance student skills and learning (e.g., plans activities that link character and citizenship education with curricular goals)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. provides “one-stop” shopping for family services through partnership of school, counselling, health, recreation, job training and other agencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. opens its building for community use after school hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. offers after-school programs for students with support from community businesses, agencies and volunteers (e.g., programs that support student achievement goals, link character and citizenship with co-/extracurricular activities).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Sample Strategies to Strengthen School–Community Partnerships

Within communities, there are human, economic, material and social resources that can support and enhance home and school activities. Integrating community partners in various ways improves schools, strengthens families and helps students succeed in school and in life.

Examples of how schools strengthen partnerships with the wider community include the following.

- Look for curricular support**  
 Identify community resources such as local agencies or service clubs who can provide information, training and materials for supporting curricular programs. For example, Lions Clubs may sponsor training in ‘Lions-Quest’ to support teaching K–9 health and life skills, and senior high career and life management programs of study.
- Establish a community resource network**  
 Students need to build healthy relationships with the community. Establishing a community resource network identifies people who can interact with students in a variety of ways, such as acting as a

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guest speaker or expert panel, participating in phone or e-mail interviews, meeting with groups of students researching particular issues, serving as mentors or coaches and becoming audiences for special events.

- **Create service learning opportunities**

Students need opportunities such as service learning to transfer skills and ideas learned in character and citizenship education to various real-life situations. Service learning projects include activities such as spring clean-up projects, buddy reading programs with a neighbouring classroom or preschool, helping to organize and promote a blood donor clinic, or preparing and serving lunch at a seniors' centre. Involve local service clubs or other partners to help identify and assess local service needs.

- **Promote and publicize partnerships**

Celebrate students' contributions to the community. Partner with local media to promote the value of service learning and community partnership.

Consider the following examples of stories that schools and jurisdictions shared about their community partnerships.

### Cross generations

“We decided to take our food sciences course out of the school and into the community. We have a special lunch for the community's seniors once a week, and we take care of a lot of the town's catering needs—especially if someone is in need of good food at a reasonable cost. We try to instill a sense of pride and service in our students so that they don't see it as a chore, but as more of a privilege. It's particularly great to see teenagers and seniors engaged in a mutually beneficial arrangement where they get to know each other in a positive light. That doesn't always happen in a smaller town!”

### Seasonal greetings

“Each year we demonstrate appreciation to our neighbourhood for their tolerance and support by delivering handmade Christmas cards to all nearby homes. My French as a Second Language bilingual students use this opportunity to apply what they've learned about seasonal greetings and expressing gratitude by writing their cards in French. We are always thrilled to receive a 'Merci!' in reply from an appreciative neighbour.”

## Finding hope

In 1995, Steven Roy requested money instead of a gift for his tenth birthday to buy flowers to take on visits to lonely people. His birthday wish grew into the inception of Hope Kids after he told other youth of his experiences. This program administered by the Hope Foundation at the University of Alberta, helps 10–17-year-old students become more aware of their own hope and learn skills for supporting hope in themselves and others as hope companions to people living in continuing care centres. Hope Kids has expanded from three continuing care centres to five in the Edmonton region. Each of the programs is based in a school and is supported by school staff in addition to Hope Foundation volunteers.

Participating in hope-focused activities as part of community service learning helps Hope Kids to recognize and access hope in themselves. Through this process they build skills and strategies that enable them to envision a future in which they see themselves participating with interest and confidence. In the process of describing inner hopes and dreams through representations and reflections, Hope Kids come to understand more about who they are and who they are becoming. Talking about journal writing as a hopeful strategy, one Hope Kid explained, “I can write down ideas of things I can do. I am not limited to anything.” Another Hope Kid described what happens when she plays the piano, “It makes me feel calmer and I think it offers me hope.” During a presentation of his hope creatures, one Hope Kid said, “I am just like this hope creature because I’m all eyes, I have a big heart and I can be a little prickly.” By naming and owning the hopeful characteristics of that particular hope creature, this youth created a new and enriched understanding of his hoping self.

## Community circle

“During National Addictions Awareness Week, the whole reserve community meets with the students and staff outside the school. All the students, teachers and community members hold hands and make a huge circle. The circle is very symbolic for many Aboriginal groups as it conveys the message that we are all one in the circle of life. It also reinforces the fact that we belong to a community and must be responsible for ourselves as a part of the circle. This means making wise decisions and not abusing drugs or alcohol. Aboriginal students, like all young people, need continual reinforcement that they are not alone in this world and that like the web of life, we are all connected and will support one another.”

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## Sharing a vision

“A primary goal of Francophone education is to allow students to strengthen their sense of Francophone identity and sense of belonging while encouraging students to actively contribute to the flourishing Francophone cultures, families and communities. We do this not only within the walls of the school but also by consciously building links with the larger French community of the past, present and future.

Our Grade 4 classes visit the local seniors’ home to hear first-hand how their Francophone predecessors contributed to the history of their province. Grade 2 students build models of the buildings which make up the physical community, including the university, churches, art gallery, theatres, restaurants and even a well-known fish market run by an Acadian family who sponsor an annual sporting event at the school. When, as part of its 100th birthday celebration, the city invited schools to submit their visions of life in the next century, our Grade 8 classes focused on what our Francophone community might look like. To no one’s surprise, all envisaged it as vibrant, diverse and thriving, just as it is today!”

### Endnotes

1. Epstein et al. 2002.
2. Reproduced with permission from Joyce L. Epstein et al., *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (2nd edition) (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 2002), p. 32.
3. Ibid., p. 32.
4. Ibid., p. 334.