

Mission Possible: Developing Effective Educational Partnerships

Linda C. Cunningham and Lisa A. Tedesco

Abstract

This paper discusses some of the basic principles essential for institutions of higher education in establishing and sustaining an effective partnership with a K-12 public school system. The Health Occupations Partners in Education (HOPE) project was launched in 1998 as one of the Health Professions Partnership Initiatives of the Association of American Medical Colleges.¹ This initiative encourages health professional schools, local community organizations, and health care industry to partner with a local K-12 public school district to increase the numbers of underrepresented minority students interested in and academically prepared to pursue higher education and future careers in the health professions. The partnership we have established via HOPE brings together health professional schools, a local community college, local industry, and community organizations to collaborate with a high school and two middle schools. We describe some of the general principles and strategies we have utilized to establish our partnership and to engage partner organizations in our school-based community outreach work.

What Do We Mean by Partnership?

Before we begin a discussion of what makes an effective partnership, we feel it is helpful to define what we mean by partnership with public schools. The meaning of *partnership* may vary depending on the person, group, or organization involved. Arriving at a common understanding of the concept of a partnership is an important first step for anyone or any organization considering forming a partnership with a public school or school district.

Partnerships of institutions of higher education, businesses, community organizations and K-12 schools can be traced to the earliest days of public education and offer rich opportunities for improved student learning and academic achievement (*Restine 1996; Cordeiro and Kolek 1996*). Unlike the traditional business-school educational partnerships, which are typically charitable in nature

¹ The Health Professions Partnership Initiative of the Association of American Medical Colleges is made possible through grant funding from the W. K. Kellogg and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations.

with the business partner agreeing to provide the school or school district with supplemental resources or services at no charge, effective educational partnerships today entail active participation and reciprocity among multiple partners to achieve common goals (*Cordeiro and Kolek 1996*). Partnerships that incorporate a collaborative and consensus-based decision-making process are also recognized as being among the most effective and successful in improving educational outcomes for students (*National Association of Partners in Education 2001*).

Development of an Effective Partnership

The Health Occupations Partners in Education (HOPE) partnership was initially conceived in 1997 when the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) announced new grant-funding opportunities available to U.S. medical schools through the Health Professions Partnership Initiative. This initiative encourages U.S. medical schools to join with other health professional and postsecondary schools and colleges, local community colleges,

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health care industry, and various local community organizations and professional associations to address the lack of diversity in the health professions by extending the educational health professions pipeline into secondary and elementary school years. Specifically, HOPE is an educational partnership with the Ypsilanti Public Schools (Ypsilanti High School, East and West Middle Schools),

the University of Michigan (Schools of Dentistry, Education, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Public Health, Social Work; the UM Health System; and six student organizations), Washtenaw Community College, Pfizer, and several local community organizations. Our partnership is designed to increase the numbers of underrepresented minority students interested in and academically prepared for postsecondary education and, ultimately, careers in the health professions. With so many different organizations joining together on one project for the first time, it was essential that certain principles be followed during the earliest stages of formation of this new partnership.

Much is already known about the characteristics and underlying principles of successful educational partnerships (*Essex 2001; Turbowitz and Longo 1997; Maeroff, Callan, and Usdan 2001; Ackerman and Cordeiro 1996; Epstein et al. 1997; Otterbourg 1986; Byrne 2000; National Association of Partners in Education 2001*). We have found that developing an educational partnership based on the following principles has been essential to the early success of the HOPE project, and positions us well for future development and sustainability.

Clearly Defined and Shared Purpose: The various individuals and organizations involved in formation of the partnership must agree on the overall direction and purpose of the partnership. Although this may seem to be a commonsense approach to any collaboration between independent groups, it is not unusual for partnerships to struggle or even fail in the implementation stage when clear consensus among the various partners is lacking. Accordingly, it is important that adequate time be devoted at the inauguration of any new partnership initiative to defining a shared purpose or creating a mission statement for the partnership. In the case of HOPE, the mission statement or purpose of the project was already set forth by the AAMC through the Health Professions Partnership Initiative. Our task was to identify and recruit those partner organizations that embraced this mission as their own.

Strong Commitment and Visible Support From Leaders: Endorsement and visible support from the leadership of each and every partner organization or constituent group is critical to building program and partnership capacity. Strong and visible commitment and support from the top leadership of a partner organization can be very helpful in facilitating institutional buy-in throughout the ranks of their organizations, but this does not guarantee the full and necessary engagement and participation of the organization's members in the partnership endeavors. Often top leadership support is not enough to foster adequate buy-in for a new program or initiative. Some organizations and communities have a more grassroots leadership infrastructure in place, which enables individual leaders at lower administrative levels of an organization or community group to emerge as ambassadors for the new project or program being developed. For example, the full support and commitment of the superintendent of a local school district does not necessarily translate into genuine support and commitment from school district principals, teachers, and parents. Finding strong advocates to serve as ambassadors for the new project at various levels throughout the organization is important. When top-level leadership has not

yet demonstrated institutional commitment to the partnership endeavors, this strategy to enlist support among key constituents within the organization can be effective in bringing the value of this partnership to the top-level administration. In other words, and to paraphrase a familiar expression, “when the people lead, the leaders will follow.”

Shared Decision-making Power Among Partners: The approach we have taken to the governing structure of the HOPE project has been a defining element of our success in working with so many different partner organizations and a local K-12 public school district. The HOPE partnership has a formal governing body, called the HOPE Partnership Council, composed of representatives from each of our partner organizations. The council meets at least quarterly and provides a forum for all

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partners to communicate directly with each other about current and future project directions. Although the administering fiscal agent for HOPE is the University of Michigan Medical School, we established this governing structure to ensure that every partner organization has an equal voice and vote in matters pertaining to project design, implementation, and evaluation. To build trust across our various partners and to ensure adequate representation of different perspectives within one organization, we have

representatives serving on the Partnership Council from several different levels within one partner organization. For example, our Partnership Council initially had one school district representative, the superintendent. Because of the diverse perspectives held by many of our school district partners and the demanding schedule of the district’s superintendent, communication was not always adequately channeled from the superintendent to the principals, and subsequently from the principals to the teachers. Likewise, parents of students in the school district also bring unique and valuable perspectives to bear, and their voices were not always represented. Accordingly, we have seats on our Partnership Council for the district superintendent, the principal and two teachers from each partner school, and a parent representative from each partner school.

Reciprocity: Our experience, like that of Trubowitz and Longo (1997), has taught us that an effective and enduring educational partnership entails the pursuit of mutually beneficial self-interests across all collaborating partners. At the micro level, the most dedicated volunteers working with K–12 education are most often those who experience personal and/or professional benefits as a direct result of their volunteer service. Similarly, but at a macro level, organizations are most likely to engage in the educational partnership endeavors when their mission, values, and culture support such efforts and when there are clear, direct and tangible rewards for their participation as an institution. For example, one of the many benefits of partnership and participation with HOPE recognized by members of the University of Michigan’s Black Pre-Med Student Association (BPMA) is the opportunity for them to engage in

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meaningful community service with younger minority students in the health professions pipeline. The BPMA students not only have an opportunity to experience the personal satisfaction of giving back to their communities by mentoring a younger person toward his or her dream of college and a future health career, but also perform a community service that is weighed favorably during the medical school admissions process. Of course, the mission, values, and culture of an organization will have a strong influence on what it perceives to be meaningful incentives and benefits for engaging in partnership work. The same holds true for any individual choosing to participate. Adequate time must be devoted at the inauguration of any new partnership to identify the benefits each partner organization wants and needs to secure their stakehold in the work at hand.

Trubowitz and Longo caution us against forming partnerships in the midst of initial enthusiasms and missionary zeal, and we agree. They quote Goodlad (1994) to emphasize the importance of addressing the reciprocal interests of each partner organization as a necessary means to the development of a truly meaningful and enduring educational partnership:

Because education is essentially a helping profession, the tendency in seeking a partnership is to do good. Yet relationships built on benign intentions tend to be fleeting. There is a greater potential in first seeing in the other partner a source of satisfying one's own needs. If there is a touch of cynicism here, so be it; but it is more a recognition of realities. And there is another important reality closely related: if in seeking satisfaction of one's own need, the needs of the partners are ignored, the partnership will soon dissolve.

Given the scope and breadth of organizations and institutions represented in the HOPE partnership, and that this partnership marks the first time all of these organizations joined together to work on a community-based project, it was important for us to develop a strategic plan that would ensure the fulfillment of all partner interests and expectations. Since HOPE is a community-based project, it was particularly

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important that the interests and needs of our community stakeholders be central to the partnership. Without consideration and response to the specific interests and needs of the school district and community partners, distrust will build and the partnership is unlikely to develop.

Trust: Schools have often participated in educational projects or reform efforts initiated by college and university faculty from which the students, parents, and teachers feel they have received little or no benefit. College faculty engaging in work with local schools and communities for the sole purpose of advancing their own research and publication agendas without regard for the needs of their target population will have a difficult time developing the kinds of relationships with school and community partners that are necessary to foster a mutually beneficial long-term educational partnership. The issue of trust was of particular significance in initiating the HOPE partnership in Ypsilanti Public Schools and remains equally important in our work today.

The community organizing efforts of Bob Moses (*Moses and Cobb 2001*) as he began his grassroots education movement, now

recognized nationally as the Algebra Project, to promote math literacy and educational equity among underrepresented minority youth relates to our own local efforts in launching the HOPE project. As outsiders from the University of Michigan with a straightforward agenda to advance the academic achievement and college preparation levels of students of color, we encountered skepticism, distrust, and resistance from several factions within the school district as we worked to build a strong foundation and a viable infrastructure for our project. Although many within the school district were indifferent and some were strongly opposed to this new initiative at the outset, we identified a small group of parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators from the community and school district who were very supportive collaborators during the initial stages of program development. These collaborators were essential in helping us to promote HOPE as a worthwhile new initiative within the school district, and to identify and recruit the first small cadre of HOPE students from each of our partner schools during the 1998–1999 school year. Once a small group of students and parents began participating in the program, positive news about HOPE began to spread, trust began to build, and teachers who were once indifferent or opposed to the program started to become interested in the new opportunities available to them and their students via HOPE. In addition to the input we solicited from students, parents, and other community partners, we also consulted with teachers and school administrators frequently during the early stages of the project’s development to ensure they had adequate and direct input into the overall design and implementation of the project. This approach helped us to establish trust and gain support among many school district teachers. We’ve learned that direct teacher engagement and support are critical to the success and future sustainability of any partnership initiative aimed at improving academic achievement, particularly among disadvantaged and/or underrepresented students.

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Sustainability: Effective educational partnerships take a long time to build, and require strong and active commitment from many stakeholders to bring about meaningful results. Depending on the purpose and objectives of the educational partnership, it could take many years or decades to achieve the goals of the partnership. We agree with Dr. Shirley Jackson (2001), member of the National Advisory Council for the Health Professions Partnership Initiative at the Association of American Medical Colleges, who reminds us to be aware of and responsive to issues of abandonment when working with schools. School personnel, she explains, have had too many experiences in which universities offer promises and programs, disrupt the school's routine, and leave the students, parents, and teachers with nothing more than unmet needs and unkept promises. Schools need to know that the partnership involves long-term commitment from all partners to develop and implement meaningful solutions to identified problems, and that the school and community partners will not once again be left high and dry after the groundwork for initial relationships has been laid. To gain genuine support and trust among partners, particularly school and community partners, it is essential that partnerships incorporate a plan for sustainability and work collaboratively to implement it beyond the initial start-up phase of any new project.

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Conclusion

As more universities begin to recognize and embrace the value of engagement and partnership with local communities and public schools to improve educational equity and opportunities for all students, attention should be focused on some of the principles known to underlie effective educational partnerships. Although the Health Occupations Partners in Education project is still relatively young, we have utilized the principles discussed in this paper with much success to guide our partnership development process. The past four years have presented us with many challenges, opportunities,

and rewards as we have worked together to establish a strong foundation and to build a viable infrastructure for our educational outreach initiative within the local community and school district of Ypsilanti, Michigan. The important work we have begun would not be possible without the ongoing commitment, support, and resources from our many diverse HOPE partner organizations and individual supporters. As we approach our fifth year of project implementation, and our final year of the initial grant funding from the Association of American Medical Colleges, we are directing increased attention and efforts toward strategies to sustain the critical work we have begun in the Ypsilanti community. The diligent and often painstaking efforts involved in laying the groundwork and building the trust necessary for an enduring and effective school-university partnership can be for naught if the trust of the community, so difficult to earn, is broken when start-up funding for the project ends. For this reason it is especially important for all partners, particularly community and school district partners, to have a sense of ownership or a real stakehold in the partnership. The days of school and community partners being the willing (or sometimes reluctant), yet disempowered, recipients of supplemental educational resources and services from well-meaning partners in higher education or industry are over. Our community and school partners bring unique and invaluable interests, perspectives, and assets to the partnership. A shared purpose, support from leadership (top-down or bottom-up), shared decision-making power, and reciprocal benefits are just some of the characteristics we have found to be essential in building trust and a true *esprit de corps* among our various HOPE partners. We believe the work we have begun via HOPE, like that of so many other universities to engage in meaningful partnerships with their local communities, is revolutionary, yet it does not use magic. Progress is made one relationship at a time and requires collaboration, determination, and perseverance among all partners to meet challenges together when they arise.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to recognize and thank the following individuals and organizations for their support of the HOPE project: Allen S. Lichter, M.D., Dean, University of Michigan Medical School; Joyce Sutton, Program Manager, HOPE; The HOPE Partnership Council; Ypsilanti Public Schools; Association of American Medical Colleges, Division of Community and Minority Programs; the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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About the Authors

- Linda C. Cunningham is the director of the Health Occupations Partners in Education (HOPE)/Health Professions Partnership Initiative at the University of Michigan and Ypsilanti Public Schools. This initiative aims to increase the numbers of under-represented minority students interested in and academically prepared to pursue higher education and careers in the health professions. Prior to joining the University of Michigan in 1998, Ms. Cunningham worked as a volunteer recruitment and training specialist in the community outreach and health education

divisions of the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute in Detroit, Michigan. She earned her bachelor of arts degree from Purdue University in 1992, and her master's degree in social work from the University of Georgia in 1995 with a concentration in children, youth, and family practice in a school-based community setting. She is a member of the National Association of Partners in Education.

• Lisa A. Tedesco is the interim provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, vice president and secretary of the university, and professor of dentistry, at the University of Michigan. Dr. Tedesco is a member of the University of Michigan President's Advisory Commission on Women's Issues and has served as special advisor to the president on diversity. She was responsible for coordinating the publication "Climate and Character," which summarizes diversity initiatives at the University of Michigan prior to 1997. She chairs the Campus Safety and Security Advisory Committee, and also serves on the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program Advisory Board and the Board in Control of Intercollegiate Athletics.

Dr. Tedesco has worked in academic dentistry for over eighteen years in the areas of behavioral science, curriculum and faculty development. From 1992 to 1998 she served as associate dean for academic affairs at the School of Dentistry at the University of Michigan. Her research and scholarship interests are in the areas of cognitive and behavioral enhancement of oral health status; stress and oral disease; and curriculum, learning, and teaching in the health professions. She has published widely in these areas and presents her work at national and international meetings. She is co-principal investigator of the University of Michigan Health Occupations Partners in Education (HOPE) project funded through the Association of American Medical Colleges Health Professions Partnership Initiative.

Dr. Tedesco earned her master's degree in education in 1975 and her doctorate in educational psychology in 1981, both from the State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1998 she was the recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award from the State University of New York at Buffalo, Graduate School of Education.