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Episode 53: Building Effective School-Community Partnerships

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners! Sam, I am so thrilled to be having a conversation today with you. I feel like it has been a while since we have been on the podcast at the same time.

Samantha Statler: I am excited for our conversation today on effective school-community partnerships because having strong school-community partnerships can really enhance learning for students and help enrich experiences and opportunities that are available to our students both in and out of school. And in general, school-community partnerships are a part of the messaging that we support when we talk about our work with the WVCGLR.

Becky Lewis: Right, Sam! We know that schools and districts can't do this work alone. That is why it is so important to develop and build strong school-community partnerships. To help guide our conversation today around community partnerships I have two resources that I want to mention the first is an article from Mills College of Education titled "How School and Community Partnerships Enhance Student Learning" and the second is a white paper from the Institute for Educational Leadership, Coalition for Community Schools, and the National Association of School Psychologists titled, "Nine Elements of Effective School Community Partnerships to Address Student Mental Health, Physical Health, and Overall Wellness". What I really like about these two resources is that they recognize the need for effective school-community partnerships and that they both give concrete ways to these partnerships.

Samantha Statler: Yes, these sources provide great ideas for how to create effective partnerships. But before we dive into how to create effective school community partnerships, Becky, let's talk about what they are and why they are important.

Becky Lewis: That is a great suggestion, Sam! When we talk about school-community partnerships we are really referring to the relationships that occur

between schools and the organizations in the community. The aim of these partnerships is to enrich and continue the learning for students when schools are not in sessions such as before school, after school, weekends, extended holiday breaks, and during the summer.

Samantha Statler: Exactly, and what is important to note about these partnerships is that while their focus may be on academics, it is not their sole focus. Often these partnerships focus on other areas as well such as social-emotional wellness, health and nutrition, the arts, sports, and mentoring.

Becky Lewis: Right, these partnerships really look at the needs of the students in their communities and build around those needs. These partnerships are also a great way for the school system to have a positive presence in the community. I know from firsthand experience that not all of our parents have had positive experiences with school and when they have that positive exposure of the school system happens outside in the community, it helps them to shift their feelings about school and its importance. Which in turn strengthens how our students feel and view schools.

Samantha Statler: I completely agree Becky. These positive experiences definitely breed positive feelings and thoughts and work to build or repair bridges between schools and families. These strong school-community partnerships also provide additional benefits to schools such as planning activities and experience around topics that allow learning to be extended outside the school while generating engagement and excitement by facilitating this learning in a different environment.

Becky Lewis: Absolutely! Sometimes something simple like changing the environment in which learning is taking place can have a big impact on engagement or generate excitement for students. Establishing strong school-community partnerships not only benefits schools and districts but it also benefits the students that reside within those communities. We have touched on this already, but these partnerships expand the learning opportunities that are available to students. Programs created from strong partnership can create enhanced or innovative programs that would not be possible in some of our schools due to limited resources.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Becky those partnerships with community organizations can offer not only support, but also equipment or resources that our schools do not have access to. I know that we have mentioned that these partnerships create programs that help to extend the school days to support learning, but these extended day and year programs also provide students with a safe environment with adult supervision that they may not have otherwise.

Becky Lewis: That is an excellent point, Sam! Having a safe place to go outside of school is very helpful for students whose parents may work from home for an extended period. Another benefit for students is that often the programs created from these partnerships explore topics in unique ways that allow students opportunities to excel in an area of interest that they may not have as much exposure to in a traditional classroom setting. For example, a program may focus heavily on the arts which allows students who are interested or naturally talented in music or drama to grow and further develop their skills.

Samantha Statler: Becky, I think now since we have talked about what school-community partnerships are and why they are beneficial to students and school districts, let's talk about how to build strong, effective school-community partnerships.

Becky Lewis: great idea!

Samantha Statler: I think a great place to start this conversation is by diving into the white paper that you mentioned earlier Becky, from the Institute for Educational Leadership, Coalition for Community Schools, and the National Association of School Psychologists titled, "Nine Elements of Effective School Community Partnerships to address Student Mental Health, Physical Health, and Overall Wellness". In this paper there are around 9 crucial elements that are necessary for the creation and sustainment of effective school community partnerships. While this article really focuses on the school-community partnership that can take place during the school day focused on students' mental health, physical health, and overall wellness, the ideas presented can be aligned to support extended day and extended year programming as well. The first element is having a leadership team that is made up of school and community stakeholders.

Becky Lewis: Right, having a leadership team at the school level is important to building effective school-community partnerships. These leadership teams set the groundwork by exploring the different resources, services, and capabilities that community organizations have to offer without duplicating efforts. These school-based leadership teams are often made up of teachers, administrators, site coordinators, students and their families, other school staff and community partners who currently work within the school. In a district that has a variety of community partners, there maybe be a need for a system-level leadership team. This team would oversee the partnerships to encompass the whole district instead of just one school. This might be needed in a small or rural district in order to pull together community organizations that are spread out across the district. The second element is completing assets and needs assessment to address student health and wellness

Samantha Statler: Absolutely, and this is so important because understanding the needs of your students and their families is crucial to ensuring that these partnerships are supporting students in the most effective way possible. In the beginning stages of forming school-community partnerships these assets and needs assessments are great ways for the group to examines what resources a currently available (people, equipment, space) and where there may be gaps that the partnership can work to fill-in. Completing these types of assessments are not only important to do in the beginning stages of forming a community school partnership, but it is equally as important to do it throughout the existing partnership so that the work and programs developed by the partnerships can become more refined to meet the ever-changing needs of the students. You want to have that open communication with your students and their families.

Becky Lewis: Yes, community partnerships can and should work to enhance the existing programs that the schools have in-place while filling in the gaps. Another important aspect of completing these assets and needs assessments is that it allows stakeholders to assess the fit of certain organizations as strong partners. There are great organizations within our communities, but they often do not know how they can support our students. The assessments help the organization see the bigger picture and where they might fit best within the partnership.

Samantha Statler: Absolutely— It is also important to take a look at data during these assessments such as student growth on assessments, graduation rates, attendance and chronic absenteeism, parent and family engagement. Taking time to complete a comprehensive overview of current assets and needs helps partnerships to develop a framework to address short term and long-term goals/results based on their examination.

Okay, moving on to the third element of effective school-community partnerships is designating a person located within the school to lead the charge of coordinating these school-community partnerships.

Becky Lewis: Right and this is such an important element because the person really maintains those relationships and is the main connection between the leadership team, and all of the other people involved within the partnership. The person who is chosen for this role should be someone who is strong in communicating and whose superpower lies within relationship building.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Becky this person really needs to be great at communicating not only ideas but keeping channels of communication open. I would also like to say that this person probably should not be an educator or principal due to the fact that we know how limited their time is already. The person who is in charge of coordination needs to be someone who has the time to maintain the open lines of communication.

The next element number is setting clear expectations and shared accountability for all of those involved in the school-community partnership. So, this can often be a complicated element because it involves taking a look at the roles and responsibilities of the school personal and community provides in facilitating services or providing learning opportunities for students while ensuring that the needs of the school are being met at the same time.

Becky Lewis: Absolutely, Sam! It is vital for community partners and school employed staff to know one another's roles and their responsibilities. This cuts down on confusion that can take place when services or learning is taking place, especially during extended learning times about who is doing what and when. It is also critical that principals continue to play a role in the school-community partnerships by continuing to develop collaborative relationships among all

individuals engaged in these partnerships and holding everyone accountable to the school's goals.

Samantha Statler: Exactly! One great and simple way to hold everyone accountable is to incorporate the relevant school goals into the objectives of each community partner; this will help to ensure that school goals are being addressed through the actions and services of the partnerships.

Becky Lewis: I love that idea, Sam! It really helps these partnerships to work smarter not harder when you tie the goals and objectives together like that. So, Sam, the fifth element is leveraging school and community resources in a way that ensures consistent access to high-quality health and wellness services. I know that this is a crucial consideration right now. We know that our students have been through a lot since the onset of the pandemic, and this is an important element that should not be overlooked when thinking about partnerships that offer services or learning opportunities during extended-day and extended-year programming.

Samantha Statler: No, I completely agree with you, Becky! Building in that access to consistent high-quality health and wellness services is important year-round, not just during the school year. I also think it is important to mention here that it would be ideal if schools could offer consistent access to school-employed specialized instructional support personnel- I know a lot of schools share their nurse, school psychologist, and even a social worker among several schools. And if a school does not have consistent access to these professionals – the district office could consult and coordinate with available district-employed health staff on the development of the school-community partnership. We want to make sure that there is not any duplicating of services and what-not so it is important for that open line of communication.

Another great point this resource makes is It's also just as important that any and all delivery of services to students is aligned with best practices and the school districts policies. Setting up a district-led training for anyone who will be delivering mental and behavioral health services to students can just continue to help that consistency of delivery and just strengthen the relationships among all stakeholders involved in the partnership.

Becky Lewis: That is a great point, Sam! Anytime that we ensure that anyone is aware of best practices and district policies is going to strengthen the time spent during extended-day and extended year programming and allow for less confusion. Another way to really strengthen these programs with our school-community partnerships is to create a detailed plan for long-term sustainability of these opportunities and programs and the partnerships. Earlier we talked about how important it is to know the needs of the students so partner organizations can see where they fit, and a long-term plan of sustainability really fits in well with that idea. In order for our programs to grow and ensure that we are providing the most effective extended-learning programs, it is important to have a vision of where we hope to go and what that will look like in terms of funding needs. I know that sustaining funding is frequently an issue we hear.

Sam Statler: Of course, financial sustainability is important in community and school partnerships but so is that human capital and the partner sustainability itself. Several districts across the country struggle with a shortage of specialized support personnel and those community mental health and wellness providers. And the pandemic has just made that even more challenging to fill those roles. Sometimes it seems there can be qualified individuals available but no financial avenue to support them or to create those new positions so that is why it is so important that districts and schools are using their support people in the most effective way.

Becky Lewis: You are right, and it is equally important that there is a commitment from both the school district and funding partners when working toward trying to hire more specialized support personnel to work in the schools and deliver those vital services to students. Unfortunately, some districts have had to move to completely outsourcing their mental and physical wellness services to community agencies because budgets are so tight. But really focusing on just improving the ratios of specialized support personnel in tandem with that funding community providers allows all students to access appropriate services.

Okay, the next element mentioned in this article was providing ongoing, comprehensive professional development that all school leaders, staff, and community partners can participate in together.

Samantha Statler: I could probably talk about this one all day because it is so closely tied with the work we do and I am passionate about it lol, but I cannot reiterate this enough just how important it is to have that ongoing comprehensive professional development not only for the schools' educators but for all of the schools' leaders, staff, and community partners. When planning professional learning, it's important that it is aligned with the school improvement plan and that all school staff including principals, teachers, and those specialized support personnel are invited along with community partners. Making sure that all stakeholders are involved really helps to continue to strengthen their collaborative work, relationships, and trust.

Becky Lewis: Yes, I agree with you. Just making sure they are all hearing the same content and best practices will help with consistency. And you might be thinking, what professional learning that would be beneficial to all stakeholders and some of those topics focusing on the health and wellness aspect could be focused on:

- A common language for health and wellness terms, as well as procedures and structure between school staff and community partners.
- How to effectively engage and involve families and other community residents in health and wellness issues, as well as offering those services to them as well when they are available

When we are thinking about content, professional development could be focused on:

- Best literacy practices when it comes to building background knowledge and vocabulary since this is a main goal for our extended-learning programs.
- Project-based learning that incorporates STEAM.

Samantha Statler: Those are all great suggestions, Becky! Another great way to ensure that school-community partnerships remain effective is to regularly meet and review the effectiveness of the programs. There are many simple ways that this could be accomplished. For example, you could use surveys that are tailored towards students, parents, and the community about the strengths and weaknesses they see in the program and their satisfaction. You could also look at school-based data such as academic, attendance, and behavioral measures of the

students who participate in the program and monitor any changes that occur within those areas.

Becky Lewis: Sam, I love the idea of measuring multiple pieces of data for the students who participate in these programs as a way to gauge its effectiveness, because it provides us with a better glimpse of the whole child and how that child is changing over time. Another tool that would be helpful to monitor the effectiveness of school-community partnerships and extended-learning programs is to review the school's strategic plan at least at the beginning and end of the school year. This will allow partnerships to make any adjustments to their program plans and serve as a reminder of the school's goals for the year.

Samantha Statler: Those are excellent ideas! I know we are coming to the close of the show Becky, but I wanted to include one final idea about we can create and foster these strong effective school-community partnerships and that is through sharing the progress these partnerships have made as well as challenges that are still being faced.

Becky Lewis: I completely agree, Sam. I love that sharing progress was the first idea you mentioned. I think often we hyperfocus on only seeing the challenges that we are currently facing, and we forget about where we started on this journey. By sharing progress and more importantly celebrating it, we are able to pause from the current challenges and see how we have faced past problems. This can give us ideas of how to overcome the challenges we are facing now, or it can even give us that boost we need to begin overcoming our current challenges.

Samantha Statler: I couldn't agree more. Well, Becky, I have enjoyed our conversation so much today, and it was nice to have the chance for us to sit down and do a show together. As we wrap up our time together, I hope that our conversation has inspired our listeners to take on some new ideas for their summer programming—and I also hope that you remember, it takes more than a school and its teachers to be successful. I would like to challenge our listeners to adopt just one of these 9 crucial elements for their school or community. A good place to start would be to just reach out to someone in the community who you know could support the extended learning opportunities that you currently offer to students.