Focusing on the Community in School-Community Partnerships: A Book Review

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Education for all students requires tremendous resources beyond that generated by tax monies. Research has shown that leveling the playing field for students requires locating the social capital of the students and school communities (Epstein, 1995; Mawhinney, 2002). Building partnerships with schools and families has had a tremendous effect on student success. Mavis Sanders has been a part of that research for over a decade, contributing to much of the work. However, her book *Building School-Community Partnerships: Collaboration for Student Success* (published in 2006 by Corwin Press) serves the purpose of providing useful information on how the school and community connection also enhances student success. Her work takes into account years of research and work in the field, providing an easily read and useful resource for researchers, school and district leaders, and teams of school-based educators, parents, and community partners.

This book begins by providing an understanding of the rationale for school and community partnerships, as well as identifying twelve categories of partnerships. It invites the reader to think of the community in a broader way and to look for partnerships that will aid the school in achieving its goals in supporting student learning and school improvement. The first chapter takes time to explore the obstacles to partnerships and to give advice on recognizing the community's individuality and uniqueness and how that affects building partnerships.

The second chapter explores five common community partners: business, universities, organizations that provide internships for youth, service agencies and professionals, and faith-based institutions, and how all these provide possible material and human resources to achieve student learning goals. This chapter provides a summary of multiple studies noting the challenges and lessons learned as well as the benefits of partnering. The chapter highlights three factors that influence the effectiveness of partnerships: a shared vision, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and open communication. The chapter lays the groundwork for understanding that both forethought and planning are important to successful partnerships.

The third chapter is dedicated to exploring what it means to be ready for more advanced forms of partnerships. The author uses the findings of the National Network of Partnership Schools research to highlight key components of more complex partnerships and their success. Five identified components of readiness for successful partnerships are examined: a high-functioning school, a student-centered environment, an effective partnership team, principal leadership, and external support.

Sanders uses a vignette in the fourth chapter to highlight four steps for schools to build the components for successful partnerships: school priority, collaboration, persistence, and communication. The vignette, while serving as a guide to building partnerships in the face of unique resistance, also naturalizes the process by noting the uniqueness of a single community that can interfere in building partnerships for change. Thus, the vignette creates an example of how to broach the atypical aspects of any community, making the process of partnership-building seem accomplishable to the reader, which is the author's intent.

Chapters five and six survey both an urban elementary and a rural high school using the components to building a successful partnership identified by the author in chapter three. These two vignettes delve into the different issues that unique urban, suburban, and rural cultures faced when building partnerships. In the case of the rural school facing competition for partnerships, the district buildings worked together, eliminating the competition that would hinder the partnership process. Likewise, the author is able to show the uniqueness of school communities and partnerships by providing both elementary and secondary program examples. Again, in a concise way, these chapters provide a motivational picture of possibilities for leaders to work toward a common goal.

Chapter seven fully describes twelve possible goal-oriented partnership activities for K-12 schools. While the list is not all-inclusive, the chapter does provide the readers with insight into the possibilities of reaching goals that are

not just academic in nature, yet are important to students' academic success. This chapter is motivational and helpful in realizing the importance of partnerships in creatively providing where there is a need.

Chapter eight provides the tools to prepare education leaders to build community partnerships. Sanders provides an agenda for a training workshop in this chapter, along with handouts and insights. This material aids the trainer in providing participants with essential information on community partnerships, opportunities to practice key aspects of developing and planning community partnerships, and then a chance to reflect on the implementation of such partnerships at their school sites. In conclusion, chapter nine provides a list of additional resources for reading and encouragement to work toward creating partnerships between the school and community.

It is the intention of the author to focus this book on partnerships with the school and community from the perspective of fulfilling the needs and reaching the educational goals for all students. This task is clearly accomplished. Using the findings of years of research and being an expert in the field, Mavis Sanders has accomplished the goal she set out to achieve in writing this book. It is thus very useful to promoting the goals of education and in providing the social capital necessary for all students to learn. The book fills the void of material written which focuses on the community. Much has been written and continues to be written concerning school and family partnerships, but this book is valuable because it adds to the possibilities of meaningful partnerships and provides the materials, tools, and understanding for building school and community partnerships.

The author demonstrates her knowledge of the subject matter with depth and a level of expertise through the conciseness of her writing and the unfolding of the material in a useable manner; Sanders is clearly the right person to produce this material. What makes it rich is that the topic is so broad, and yet she is able to funnel it into some key components and to lay it out in a usable form in just a few pages.

The author did not, however, address an essential piece in building partnerships, namely, identifying the benefits reaped by the community with which schools are partnering (Epstein, 1995; Mawhinney, 2002). For years, professional trainers have encouraged businesses and leaders to come to the rescue of schools with their resources, with no thought or focus given to how the partnership should or would benefit the community partner. Thus, it often is the case that many see partnerships as more of an annoyance, because schools seem to be concerned more with their end of the partnership and not the needs or desires of the community from which they seek help. Thus, an aspect that seems to be lacking here is the value of reaching the goals of a school and

community partnership from the viewpoint of the community partner. What does the community get out of the partnership? This essential question needs consideration when looking at how to build school community.

Conclusion

Mavis Sanders has done an exceptional job with this book, and it is a useful publication that should be read by those who do research and those that are working on building partnerships. While the book addresses the needs of K-12 schools in the United States, it would be useful to those in other countries or situations in understanding partnerships and effective steps toward working collaboratively to change the status quo and reach new heights when resources are limited. It is an excellent book for educational leaders to have on their shelves.

References

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