BRYCS

Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

Refugee Children in U.S. Schools:
A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel

Tool 2: Schools and Refugee-Serving Agencies: How to Start or Strengthen Collaboration

To access the entire Toolkit, visit: http://www.brycs.org/publications/schools-toolkit.cfm

Schools and Refugee-Serving Agencies: How to Start or Strengthen Collaboration

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What is collaboration?

The goal of community collaboration is to bring individuals and members of communities, agencies, and organizations together in an atmosphere of support to systematically solve existing and emerging problems that could not be solved by one group alone.[1] This tool will focus on community collaboration among *schools*, *refugee resettlement agencies*, and *ethnic community based organizations*. While refugees bring with them a host of strengths, schools may need external partners to solve challenges related to interpreter access, funding, parent involvement, programming for students with interrupted formal education, out of school time opportunities for refugee youth, and more.

Why talk about collaboration?

An organization may be able to solve some problems on its own, but real-life challenges usually require everyone's efforts. It is widely recognized that any one organization is not likely to achieve its goals without the assistance and support of other organizations.[2] As one author put it, "Each requires the others in order to succeed."[3] Beyond joint problem-solving, key reasons for collaborating include sharing

"Each requires the others in order to succeed."

resources and information, filling programmatic gaps, facilitating sustainability, and reducing the duplication of services.

Who might participate in a collaborative effort to support refugee children and families?

The primary refugee-serving agencies schools might collaborate with are refugee resettlement and ethnic community-based organizations, which are sometimes called Mutual Assistance Associations. These are refugee-led organizations that typically focus on refugees from a specific country or region of the world, such as Somalis or Southeast Asians. Such refugee-serving agencies can help bridge the gap between refugee families and the schools, which may lead to greater parent involvement and improved student performance. Refugee-serving agencies, which have established trusting relationships with refugee communities, may facilitate communication with families and whole communities. Once relationships are established with these key partners, other agencies to consider partnering with to support refugee children and families include:

❖ **Other non-profits or community based organizations**	❖ **Youth organizations**
	❖ **Local government**
❖ **Faith-based communities or organizations**	❖ **Local businesses**
❖ **Child and family services**	❖ **Libraries**
❖ **Social service agencies**	❖ **Universities and community colleges**
❖ **Healthcare**	❖ **Foundations**
❖ **Law enforcement or juvenile justice**	❖ **Service clubs**

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To think through possible partners for your collaborative effort, see the National Network for Collaboration's Participation Matrix (see "Standards of Practice," Appendix A). Large school districts with various departments serving refugee children (e.g. ELL or ESL Department, Welcome Center, etc.) or large numbers of schools may need to incorporate strategies from this tool in order to establish a solid collaboration within their district before focusing on external partners. Lastly, in a collaboration focused on refugee children, the importance of member diversity cannot be overstated; including refugees from the various refugee communities attending school is crucial.

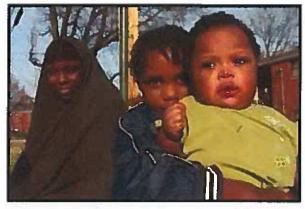### Are all types of collaborations the same?

No, not all collaborative efforts have the same purpose of work and therefore require different structures and processes for conducting business. Although researchers have used different labels for various levels of collaboration, they typically describe increasing levels of collaboration as moving from the simplest, sharing of information, to complex relations that involve sharing financial resources, data, and integrated decision making.[4] The National Network for Collaboration's model[5] outlines five levels of "community linkages" and each level's purpose, structure, and process. (Note: Their model only refers to the fifth level as "collaboration.") The goal is not for all groups to reach the highest level; in some cases, a lower level of linkage may best serve the group's needs.

Community Linkages - Choices and Decisions			
Levels	**Purpose**	**Structure**	**Process**
Networking	• Dialog and common understanding • Clearinghouse for information • Create base of support	• Loose/flexible link • Roles loosely defined • Community action is primary link among members	• Low key leadership • Minimal decision making • Little conflict • Informal communication
Cooperation or Alliance	• Match needs and provide coordination • Limit duplication of services • Ensure tasks are done	• Central body of people as communication hub • Semi-formal links • Roles somewhat defined • Links are advisory • Group leverages/raises money	• Facilitative leaders • Complex decision making • Some conflict • Formal communications within the central group
Coordination or Partnership	• Share resources to address common issues • Merge resource base to create something new	• Central body of people consists of decision makers • Roles defined • Links formalized • Group develops new resources and joint budget	• Autonomous leadership but focus in on issue • Group decision making in central and subgroups • Communication is frequent and clear
Coalition	• Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems • Develop commitment for a minimum of three years	• All members involved in decision making • Roles and time defined • Links formal with written agreement • Group develops new resources and joint budget	• Shared leadership • Decision making formal with all members • Communication is common and prioritized
Collaboration	• Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks • Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities	• Consensus used in shared decision making • Roles, time and evaluation formalized • Links are formal and written in work assignments	• Leadership high, trust level high, productivity high • Ideas and decisions equally shared • Highly developed communication

I think I'm in the "Networking" stage and would like to explore the possibility of establishing one of the more advanced linkages, but I'm kind of stuck. I'm having a hard time getting "in" to the school (or refugee-serving agency). What can I do?

The following tips were provided by Refugee School Impact Grantees:
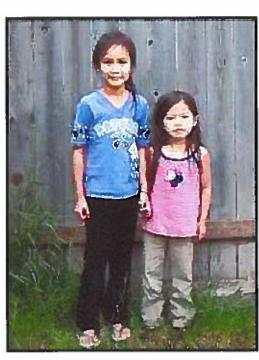

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❖ Learn to speak the partner agency or school's language (e.g. acronyms, vocabulary associated with the agency's field).

❖ Attend to the agency or school's culture. Recognize that schools within the same district may have different "cultures."

❖ Volunteer to assist or participate in your partner agency's events (e.g. field trips, etc.).

❖ Be patient in identifying the appropriate person to speak with and setting up initial meetings. Be persistent, while also recognizing everyone's busy schedules.

❖ Get on the agenda of the partner agency's staff meeting or in the case of schools, their professional development docket. Keep your initial presentation brief and talk about what your agency has to offer and how you can help. You can discuss what you may need from them in subsequent meetings.

❖ Spend time truly listening and learning about the partner agency or school's experiences with refugee children.

❖ For agencies collaborating with the schools, get plenty of "face time" so everyone becomes familiar with your agency and services.

❖ Start initial conversations with information about your agency or school and how you can help. Bring something to the table!

❖ Locate "allies" who recognize the needs of refugee children and support the idea of establishing an agency relationship.

❖ Get to know as many people as possible at your partner agency's office or school.

Are there any unique collaborative structures used by Refugee School Impact Grantees or others working with refugee children in the schools?

The following collaborative structures used by Refugee School Impact Grantees (RSIG) can be categorized under the above model's five levels of collaboration:

❖   Networking – RSIG collaborative initiatives at this level report communicating via email, phone, and conducting face-to-face meetings. Most cross-training of staff, if organized by individuals as opposed to a central body, falls under this category.

❖   Cooperation/Alliance – RSIG collaborative initiatives at this level report using conference calls, along with the above-mentioned methods of communication.

❖   Coordination/Partnership – Many RSIG programs have home/school liaisons, who are often former refugees employed by a refugee resettlement agency or ethnic community based organization. Many of these arrangements can be characterized as this level of collaboration. In addition, this level includes groups with established policies and procedures used to clarify roles.

❖   Coalition – This is the first level requiring formal written agreements. RSIG sites report using Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and "linkages" (less formal than MOUs) for this. Some of the coalitions (and task forces, steering committees, etc.) run by RSIG sites fall under this level of collaboration. Others, however, may be classified as "coalitions" in name only while realistically operating at a different level.

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❖   Collaboration – RSIG collaborative initiatives at this level often co-apply for grants, subcontract with partner agencies, and/or have school-based services.

What steps should we take to establish a new collaboration or maintain an existing one?

The National Network for Collaboration's "Collaboration Framework" can set the groundwork for a new collaboration or can be a tool for communication of an existing collaboration. The framework suggests four initial steps:

1. Using the "Community Linkages" chart above, begin a conversation (or do the Find Your Group activity from the "Evaluation" section) about the type of collaborative relationship that currently exists or that would be appropriate to develop to improve the well-being of refugee children and families.

2. As a group, use the network's tools ("Progress Checklist" or the "Spider Web" from the subject index) to assess the factors that influence the collaborative process. These tools will help the group develop an understanding of where they are today and where they would like to be in three years.

3. Identify the vision (an image of the desired future), mission (purpose of the collaboration), and values (beliefs individuals and the group hold). These three items make up the foundation, or core, of the group effort.

4. Define the outcomes, or desired community conditions, resulting from the collaboration. Develop a common understanding of project results or outcomes as well as a common understanding of activities which are the means to achieving those results. Use existing tools and resources for establishing outcomes.

What are some of the barriers to collaborating and how can we overcome them?

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Collaborative relationships can be challenging due to external factors (political climate, history of working together, lack of resources that leads to partners competing for funding, etc.) along with interpersonal dynamics and human nature.[6] Furthermore, few funders require collaboration which makes it challenging for busy professionals with competing demands.

For refugees from ethnic community based organizations who are interested in partnering with the schools, there may be additional barriers such as fear of involvement, limited English proficiency, and limited knowledge of how "the system" works.[7]

In light of these challenges, the following tips for overcoming barriers were provided by Refugee School Impact Grantees:

1. From the beginning, commit to agreed-upon **outcomes** as well as roles, policies, and procedures.

2. Do not **over commit!** Be realistic about your time and other commitments. Committing to something you cannot follow through on may ultimately damage inter-agency relationships.

3. Make sure there is **adequate support** and "buy in" from your own organization before partnering with another agency.

4. Try to establish a **culture of transparency**, honesty, and trust from the beginning. For partner agencies that could potentially compete for funding, it is helpful when state refugee and education agencies help facilitate a tone of non-competition.

5. Discuss how to handle **staff turnover** before it occurs and build in structures to allow for collaboration to extend beyond the individuals who initiate the relationship.

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> *"Keep your ultimate goal – helping refugee children – in mind at all times."*
>
> -Shazia Waters
> PA Department of Education

6. Busy professionals should be able to recognize and define the **benefits** of being a part of the group.

7. Remember that students' academic performance improves when their basic needs are met and their families and communities are strengthened. For stakeholders concerned with academic performance, collaborations can focus on **school performance** as the primary outcome while recognizing the various factors that contribute to refugee students' success.

8. Recognize that **larger is not always better** and that this depends on the type of collaborative structure. For example, studies show that coalitions are most effective when they are small and their members are limited.[8]

9. Keep your ultimate goal – **helping refugee children** – in mind at all times and do not get caught up in minor disagreements with partner agencies. Focus on each other's strengths and how you can help each other to create a win-win situation.

[1] National Network for Collaboration. (1995). http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4398

[2] Jones, Johnny M., Crook, Wendy P., & Webb, Jennifer Reid. (2007). Collaboration for the Provision of Services: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Community Practice*, 15 (4), 41-71

[3] Lawson, Hal A. & Sailor, Wayne. (2000). Integrating Services, Collaborating, and Developing Connections with Schools. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 33(2), 1-22.

[4] Cross, Jennifer E., Dickmann, Ellyn., Newman-Gonchar, Rebecca, & Michael-Fagan, Jesse. (2009). Using Mixed-Method Design and Network Analysis to Measure Development of Interagency Collaboration. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 30(3), 310-329.

[5] Bergstrom, A., Clark, R., Hogue, T., Iyechad, T., Miller, J., Mullen, S., Perkins, D., Rowe, E.,Russell, J., Slinski, M., Snider, B.A., and Thurston, F. (1995). *Collaboration framework: Addressing community capacity.* Columbus, OH: National Network for Collaboration.

[6] Ibid, Note 2.

[7] Binder-Aviles, H. & Vu, Y. *Increasing Refugee Civic Participation: Starting with the Schools.* Web-Based Conference Call Training for Refugee Service Providers. September 23, 2008. http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2784

[8] Kadushin, C., Lindholm, M., Ryan, D., Brodsky, A., & Saxe, L. (2005). Why it is So Difficult to Form Effective Community Coalitions. *City & Community, 4*, 255-275.