

Making Connections: Linking Schools and Communities

Benjamin Sherman

A New York City principal sees it as part of his mission to draw on community resources to expand learning opportunities for students.

The East-West School of International Studies in Queens, New York, was created in 2006 as part of New York City's effort to expand student options by creating new small high schools. With 427 students in grades six through twelve, it is one of the smallest schools in the city.

In keeping with its name, the school has a strong focus on international studies and languages, particularly Asian languages. All students are expected to study Chinese, Japanese, or Korean for five hours a week. The school is also part of the Transatlantic School Innovation Alliance, a partnership between schools in New York City and London, for which the Annenberg Institute for School Reform provides support.

Benjamin Sherman, East-West's principal, spoke to *Voices in Urban Education* editor Robert Rothman about leading a school with vibrant community partnerships.

The focus of this issue is on leadership in schools that engage community partners. I wanted to get your perspective on what your role as a principal is in such a system and how that might be different from what you might be doing if you were just responsible for your building. How do you see your role in terms of working with partnerships?

I like to get the kids out of the building for experiential learning. And I like to use resources in the community to bring experiences in for the kids. So I see my role as a connector, someone who goes out and creates a relationship and then puts the key pieces into place so that the relationship grows for the benefit of children.

That's pretty much it. And then I try to manage the relationships with external partners once they're up and ready. It's not perfect, but it moves along.

What are some of the partnerships you have?

We have a partnership with an organization called OATS – Older Adult Technology Services. This is a small nonprofit that builds on another partnership we have with a place called Self-Help Senior Services, which is a senior citizen residence – not a nursing home, but a senior citizen residence – for senior citizens who are living close to the poverty line or below the poverty line. They're about a block away from

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our school. We get our kids in there volunteering with the seniors, and through OATS, our kids are trained to teach the seniors technology. That's a very exciting partnership.

We have another partnership with a group called iMentor, which arranges one-on-one mentor relationships with our tenth-grade students. The relationships primarily consist of weekly e-mail letters from the mentor to the mentee and from the mentee to the mentor, on a set topic, following a curriculum. It involves tremendous reading and writing, use of technology, and an outside organization that trains mentors. Just another adult for kids to touch base with.

We have another relationship with a place called Community Works. Community Works is based out of Manhattan. It's another small nonprofit. Right now they are sending an outside artist to our school for a multi-year push on a program focusing on an exploration of the Japanese American experience as internees in the internment camps during World War II. So the kids are learning about that experience, they're creating artwork to interpret it, they're working with this outside artist, and the artwork they're creating is part of a multi-year traveling arts exhibition, which is travelling around the United States.

We're working with TSIA, the Transatlantic School Innovation Alliance. That's a partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and a school in London. Each of us is studying kids who are having difficulty with literacy. We've been able to move kids through this partnership.

There are others I wish would happen. I'm looking at a swimming partnership that will get our kids into the local public pool. That one hasn't

happened. I'm trying to make that happen. I would like to get our kids in a partnership with an outfit called Recycle a Bicycle, where someone comes in and teaches the kids how to fix a clunker bicycle. They learn about the mechanics of bicycle repair and they learn a marketable skill. And then they get to keep the bicycle that they've just spent half a year fixing. That one hasn't happened yet. I was able to bring that into my old school, but I haven't been able to bring that relationship into my new school. But I'm still working on it; it's in the works.

Building the Skills to Work with Partners

Did your preparation as a principal provide you with the skills you need to serve this role as a facilitator and manager of partnerships, or did you learn that along the way?

No, I learned that along the way. My training programs did not address the use of partnerships at all. But my interest in bringing outside opportunities in for kids is something that began when I was a teacher. And I think that was one of the things that actually helped me get into the principals' program and into the leadership role that I do today.

Along the way, in the past three years as a principal, I've learned how to say no to partnerships that don't really work in our best interest. I've learned how to negotiate prices. I've learned how to look at relationships and figure out which are sustainable and which ones aren't, and who do I have on my staff who will feel comfortable doing whatever is required, and who will not.

I've learned not to jump at every possibility and to prioritize. For example, we had an opportunity last year to do a tae kwon do program. We do a

study of Korean and Asian culture, so a tae kwon do program, all expenses paid, would have been a good thing for us. Except the partner wanted to do the classes in an off-site place fairly far from the school. They couldn't guarantee that it was going to be a multi-year partnership. I just looked at it and thought, gee, this is a great opportunity, but it takes about a year to get a partnership up and running, and if they can't guarantee funding for the second year, I'm going to be burning a whole lot of kids and their parents who are going to get all gung ho and jump into the first year and, in the second year, the partnership pulls out, then I'm going to be the one left holding the bag. The kids are going to be the ones who are going to lose. So, rather than taking that risk in year one, I just said no. I'm looking for sustainable partnerships.

One of the problems of doing the partnership is points of contact. Ideally, when my school becomes involved in a partnership, I want my organization and the other organization

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to grow together. We start off with a single point of contact – me and someone in the organization – and then expand the contacts so that it's me and a teacher or two plus their main point of contact and lower-level people, and then expand it so that we start to mesh and communicate at many different levels. If, over time, that's not happening, then that's an indication to me that the relationship really is not building. It's not happening.

The real danger there is, if their person leaves, then we don't have a relationship anymore. That happened with an outside organization that we worked with in year one. We had kids going to this off-site nonprofit a couple times a year, helping to plant a community garden and interacting with mem-

bers of the community. Then the main point of contact, a social worker, left for another job elsewhere, and the whole relationship just disappeared overnight. That forced me to take a look and see where the problem was. The problem was, the relationship was really me and this one person. We had a relationship, and she was not able to grow the relationship on her side. So, as soon as she left, the whole thing collapsed.

So, now, that's always in my head: are there particular points of contact with the partner, and how does the partner want to change and want to grow as a result of the relationship? And how can we hold each other accountable?

Outcomes and Accountability

How do the school and the partners hold one another accountable?

It's primarily through face-to-face meetings at scheduled points along the way. So there are scheduled checkpoints. There are typically reports that the partner creates – annual reports or semi-annual reports – and at these checkpoint meetings, it's "How's it going? Where are the difficulties? Are there teachers who are involved in the relationship who are causing difficulties or not doing what they're supposed to be doing? Or is everything going okay?"

Are there certain outcomes that everyone is supposed to achieve?

Yes, there are always outcomes. There are almost always quantifiable outcomes. And if the outcomes aren't being achieved, then the questions are: Why not? Where's the stumbling block? What can I, as the principal, do in moving things along? Or what can the partner do in moving things along?

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the mentor writes and the number of e-mails the student mentee writes. They monitor the number of times that the mentors meet with their mentees. They monitor the number of times the students can get on the computers or can't get on the computers, and they hold me accountable for that. And I hold them accountable if the mentors don't show up or if the mentors don't write back.

It works, but sometimes it's uncomfortable. There are uncomfortable conversations that happen between us, or between me and my teachers.

Have you had a situation where you found the partnership wasn't working out and you had to end it?

Yes. We're involved right now in severing a major relationship with an outside organization that in our opinion really has not worked to meet the needs of the school. We're actually using the third party that brought us together to help facilitate the meetings to facilitate a non-aggressive disengagement – to help keep us from getting to each other's throats. To disengage gently, which is difficult.

Staffing and Support

When you're bringing on staff, do you look for people with the skills to work with outside organizations? Is there a difference in the kind of people you look for?

Yes, absolutely. I'm always looking for people who have outside partnership experiences or who have volunteer experiences, people who have worked with the Boy Scouts, with the Girl Scouts, people who worked at homeless shelters or at soup kitchens, or have done internships at nonprofits. I'm always looking for such people.



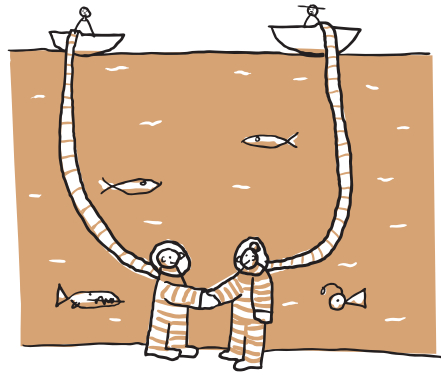
Does the Department of Education provide support for your work with partners?

Not at all. They envision the principal as the captain of the ship. I'm given great freedom to do what I want, as long as there are quantifiable student academic results. I'm given a budget to run a school that is not sufficient, so it's really up to me, the captain of the ship, to pull in other resources that will help the ship to move forward. That's where I bring in nonprofits and for-profits and different relationships that will help to make the school an exciting place.

Does the support the partner provides change over time? Do they get more involved with the school and want to do other things?

Ideally, yes, but I haven't really seen that yet. Usually a partnership happens because of a specific need or a specific purpose the partner has. They get a grant to do X and, hopefully, over time, X, Y, and Z will happen, but very often, it's tightly focused around X.

With iMentor, there are other possibilities that hopefully will happen, but largely they haven't happened. The mentors have not gotten involved



in our school. Other people from the organization have not gotten involved. It's a very tightly focused purpose. It would be great if more people would be touched and if they started to remove some of the blinders that they wear and if they could see that we have this need and they could meet that need, but that hasn't happened.

Most of the partnerships we have are tightly focused around one purpose. There isn't a great deal of expandability into other purposes.

The Challenges of Deepening the Relationship

Could you foresee a situation where the partner really got involved in the core curriculum of the school?

We started the school with a partner, and the idea was that they would get involved in the core curriculum. In the first year, they made it very well known to us that they were not interested at all in getting involved in curriculum, that wasn't their area of expertise, they didn't feel comfortable, and they didn't want to do it. But we would be open to a partner doing something like that.

We've written grants with Queens College that would have moved us in that direction.

We were founded with that idea: that this was going to be a community-partnership school. But it really hasn't happened like that. The community wants to make noise about certain things, and then once their needs are met, they step back and they don't want to help too much, don't want to really get involved in curriculum, and I think don't want to get involved in accountability for curriculum or for outcomes.

People and organizations have very tight focuses and don't want to move beyond those tight focuses, in general, from our experience. I'm always jealous of schools like the KIPP schools that get these deeper partnerships that affect the school, or so it seems from newspaper articles that I read.

A lot of times the partners say the schools are not open to that kind of relationship and want to protect their prerogatives. But you seem open and willing to have them involved in that way.

Yes, but it takes time. I don't need anyone who's going to come in and say, "Fix this," and then step back and not do anything. I'm interested in someone who can say, "Let's meet and talk about how we can fix it together," or "How can we create this opportunity together? And we're willing to look for resources to help support this." That would be great. Sure.