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Evaluating and Working with Community Agencies: A Guide For the Principal

Schools can take the initiative in dealing with community agencies, says this writer, who offers some suggestions on how schools can help such agencies develop programs to meet student needs.

BY CARL I. FERTMAN

MOST PRINCIPALS have received dozens of telephone calls and visits from community agency representatives wanting to conduct a program with and/or in the school. Given public concerns about drugs, alcohol, suicide, eating disorders, single parents, sexual abuse, poverty, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, and AIDS, it is more than likely that principals are overrun with offers of assistance in handling these issues.

How is a principal to select the agencies with which to work? Naturally, principals want to select agencies that will do the best job for the school and students. But the agencies should cooperate with the schools, not overburden them by suggesting solutions requiring the schools to do more on their own.

CARL I. FERTMAN is executive director, Maximizing Adolescent Potentials Program, University of Pittsburgh, Pa.

How does a principal evaluate an agency's ability to work with the school? What can the schools do to foster cooperative assistance on the part of community agencies? What should schools expect from soliciting agencies? What can schools demand of agencies with whom they have worked previously, but with whom they want to forge a new relationship with more shared responsibility?

Community agencies provide services to deal with many personal, family, and community issues. The agencies have both the trained personnel and materials or resources to act on issues. Frequently they have staff available to follow up and to provide support services if necessary.

The following questions can be used as a tool by administrators to assess the ability of various agencies to serve the needs of students, families, and the community. They can be used to develop a

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district policy on cooperative efforts with agencies.

1. Who are the agency staff?

An effective administrator uses educational and job experience criteria when hiring new teachers. But administrators make little effort to establish such criteria in selecting community agencies that might serve schools. However, a community agency, like a school, is only as good as its staff.

Inquiry about the agency staff's experience working in schools, educational background, related job experience, and professional certification is recommended. The purpose of such inquiry is to determine if the agency staff will work well with the school. In some cases, administrators may want to interview the staff or attend an agency staff meeting.

Information should also be sought about the type and amount of supervision the staff receives, as well as the background and role of their supervisors. Good supervision enhances and supports good staff performance.

2. Is the agency licensed and accredited?

Schools are licensed and accredited by local and state governmental and professional organizations. Community agencies are also licensed and accredited. State departments of health, education, commerce, and community welfare have developed licensing procedures for programs offering services. Typically an annual review is required for maintenance of the license.

Accreditations by national and state professional associations are now available for a number of community services. The Joint Hospital Accreditation Commission and the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities are examples of such accrediting groups. Different from state licensing, which tends to focus on structural and fiscal aspects of organizations, accreditation is

concerned with delivery of a predetermined level of quality service.

Seek to work with programs that are licensed and accredited. While this does not ensure quality, it does demonstrate an attempt at credibility and quality assurance. Inquire about a particular agency licensing and accreditation process. Ask to see the required procedure manuals. Many government agencies and associations have program monitors who make regularly scheduled site visits. Ask to be included in the next visit. Monitors typically like to talk to groups who receive an agency's services.

3. Does the agency provide references?

Deciding to work with a community agency involves risks. Ask for references who can address your specific concerns and questions. Letters of support, newspaper articles, program materials, and personal testimony are not generally useful in making a decision to work with a community program.

Administrators need an opportunity to talk with staff members from other schools about their experiences with the agency. The purposes of the exchange are for the administrator to better understand both the positive and negative aspects of any involvement, to think about the best way to maximize the benefits of working with the agency, and to assess expectations for involvement.

Likewise, even if the agency's reputation is good, talking directly to various levels of school personnel, such as board members, administrators, teachers, and counselors enables the administrator to be realistic about the program functions and outcomes. In this regard, when requesting references, ask for various levels of school personnel with whom you can talk.

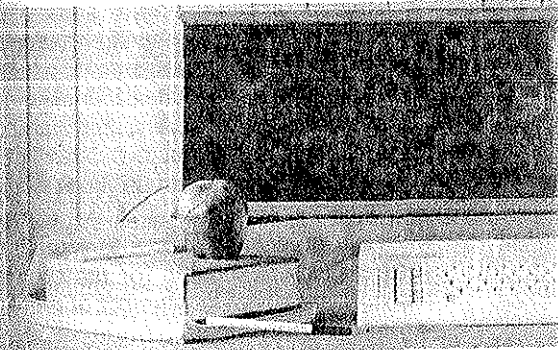
4. Does the agency abide by professional and ethical standards?

An agency should provide a statement of professional and ethical standards. Such a statement might be that it

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complies with the ethical code of a national professional or accreditation organization such as the National Association of Social Workers, the National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors, or the American Association for Counseling and Development. Further, a statement is needed about professional practices, particularly in relation to confidentiality, sexual harassment, child abuse, and life-threatening behavior.

Clarification of what an agency will do in each of these situations is best obtained prior to any program implementation. Even if an agency is not working directly in these areas, they are working with the school, and the agency practices must be acceptable to the school district. Conversely, the agency must be accepting of school ethical and professional standards.

5. *What is the agency's insurance coverage?*

Schools are required by law to have insurance to cover various types of situations. Community agencies may not have the same type of insurance requirements.

Ask that agencies submit a certificate of insurance showing type, limits, and policy expiration dates. General and professional liability, workman's compensation, and automobile coverage with acceptable limits are recommended. In some cases agencies might have umbrella policies that cover a wider range of situations.

Risks in having an uninsured or underinsured agency involved in a school are great. If doubts exist about the coverage, legal counsel should review and assess the possible consequences of working with the agency.

6. *What are the agency resources?*

An agency's success is dependent upon the agency's resources. Buildings, support staff, equipment, supplies, and adequate and stable funding are

resources to look for in an agency.

The agency resources determine in large part the role it can play in serving the students and school. Without adequate resources, services may be limited. Therefore, try to assess what resources are available and what resources are needed by the students. For example, does the agency have sufficient agency descriptions and materials for all students, teachers, and parents who may need or want them? Are relevant audiovisual materials, books, and pamphlets available?

Visit the agency offices to see if the office space is suitable for the offered services. What are the number of professional, support, and volunteer staff members?

Is there ongoing staff development and training? What are the agency's funding sources? Does it receive governmental or foundation grants? Is it a fee-for-service agency? Answers to these questions help to assess the agency's depth and ability to respond to students and schools.

7. *What are the agency's service linkages?*

Community agencies operate within a series of networks and systems based on the type of program service, target population, community location, funding structure, as well as staff time, energy, and orientation. These networks may extend beyond the local level to the state and national level.

The need to determine the linkages of an agency are threefold: quick access to services, resources, and information. A primary reason for working with a community agency is to get access to services for students. Look for community agencies that have an established network of referral sources. Ask to see letters of agreement that document specific referral procedures and responsibilities, and verification that they are updated on a regular basis.

As mentioned previously, program resources determine to a large extent an agency's ability to serve a school. An extensive network that readily links an agency to varied resources is desirable. Finally, schools need current information about program content, legislative actions, and funding. Timely and accurate information flow is enhanced through well-established networks. Before working with an agency, ask how it is linked to other service providers, resources, and information sources.

8. *How are agency programs evaluated?*

Demands for evaluation arise internally and externally, and are initiated either to prove a program's effectiveness or to improve its effectiveness. School board members, principals, teachers, counselors, students, and parents might all have an interest in a particular program. Their concern might include documentation of activities, outcomes, efficiency, or costs.

Ask how the agency's programs are evaluated. The evaluation design and report should match the information needs of the principals and others in the school district. Whether the agency is providing a speaker for an inservice program or helping to develop a school

health clinic, clarifying the evaluation information available to the school should be a priority.

9. *Is the program individualized to the school?*

Too often, community agencies do not become involved with the school until a problem arises. At that point, the need to respond may not leave time to talk about program details or to do a careful needs assessment. Schools simply accept the training, recommended procedure, and/or materials without much discussion of what would work best in a particular school and the consequences of any action for the school and students.

Conclusion

Schools and community agencies must work cooperatively to best serve students and their families, either in the school building or in the community. While schools traditionally have been more passive in ascertaining their influence, what is recommended here is a positive stance in working with agencies.

The questions provided here can be used to assess agencies that approach schools to initiate new programs as well as those already working with schools.

Classroom Research Helps Teachers Grow

Classroom-based research by teachers working in interdisciplinary groups relieves the isolation that is known to depress teachers, and gives them the support they need to solve problems they encounter in their teaching, according to Marian M. Mohr and Marion S. MacLean in *Working Together: A Guide for Teacher-Researchers*.

The authors see the research groups as a practical way to implement the concept that teaching can best be enhanced not through new requirements handed down from above, but through interactive staff development centered in the schools.