UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

4HSFS101.1

doi.org/10.32473/edis-4h399-2019

School-Based 4-H Programming: Working With Partners Effectively[1]

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Why should you work with partners?

Partnerships equal possibilities. Partnerships provide an opportunity for multiple organizations to address community challenges while benefitting at the same time through shared resources, funding, personnel, and expertise.

Desiring to partner with a school-based site is beneficial but not always easy to implement. For more information on what a school-based program is, refer to Spero and Munyan (2018), *School-Based 4-H Programming: Getting Started* (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/4H389). Being professional in your collaboration, prepared in your assessment, and intentional about your needs will increase the likelihood of a successful partnership.

In *School, Family, and Community Partnership: Your Handbook for Action,* Epstein (2019) defines "the development of an excellent partnership program [as] a process, not a single event." She explains that "not all activities that are implemented will succeed the first time...." These features emphasize that partnerships should be thought out in advance, will need to be nurtured, and require patience for success.

STEP 1: Assess your county program: What can you provide?

- Assess your county program and determine what you can provide in terms of assistance. This is called a Needs Assessment. For more information on a Needs Assessment, refer to Harder (2010), *Determining Program Priorities* (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC105).
- Identify your organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT). For more information on how to conduct a SWOT analysis refer to Orr (2013), *Conducting a SWOT Analysis for Program Improvement* (https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED543801.pdf). While SWOT is often used for business models, if you treat your partnership as a business, these steps will help you evaluate your organization with honesty and begin your partnership with integrity.
- Once you've assessed and analyzed your own organization, determine your parameters in regard to what you can offer.

STEP 2: Partner Development

Now that you know what your organization can bring to the table and what it needs, it is time to prepare to meet with your potential partner. Below are a series of questions to consider asking during your initial meeting. It is imperative that all the relevant staff, employees, administrators, etc. are a part of this conversation, so

1. This document is 4HSFS101.16, one of a series of the 4-H Youth Development Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date June 2019. Revised November 2022. Visit the EDIS website at https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu for the currently supported version of this publication.

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make sure to ask yourself who else may need to be invited. For more ideas on partnership questions, refer to the University of New Hampshire's (2019) *Afterschool Partnership Questionnaire* (https://studylib.net/doc/15920128/afterschool-partnership-questionnaire).

Resources

- How is your program funded (federal, state, grants, fees)? If your program is grant-funded, how often is the grant cycle and are you able to be a part of the grant?
- How are your materials paid for?
- What curriculum do you currently use?
- What programs do you offer?
- What programs would you like to offer?

Staff Training

- What kind of training do you provide for your employees?
- What trainings are mandatory and which ones are voluntary or supplemental to your site? Examples of trainings include those that are required by the school district, grant, Department of Education, or Department of Child and Family Services.
- What topics do mandatory trainings cover? What are the topics covered by voluntary or supplemental trainings? These may include risk management, child safety, youth development, or subject specific trainings.
- When do these trainings take place (number of days, hours, etc.)?
- Are incentives or recognition given to staff for completing voluntary or supplemental trainings?
- Are you able to assist in any of these trainings?
- Would staff be amenable to supplemental trainings and could you assess what skills they may be looking for?
- What is the best way to have access to and train staff?

Family/Parent Engagement

- What are the volunteer requirements for your site? This includes screening requirements and any additional volunteer hours required by the site.
- Are family/parent engagement workshops a component of your program? Are these required?
- How often are the family/parent engagement opportunities? What is the participation like?
- Do you run these sessions or do partners manage them?
- How do you connect with family/parents on a regular basis (newsletters, social media, telephone calls, text messages, etc.)?
- Are family/parents given some type of handbook with rules and regulations for participating in your program?

Evaluation

- Are your youth evaluated?
- If they are, how so and how is that data used?
- Can you have access to that data and/or would you be allowed to evaluate the youth you work with in a program?

Partners

- Who do you currently partner with?
- What services do they provide?

Barriers

- What are some of the barriers in resources, evaluations, etc. to your current program?
- What have been some of the barriers to a successful partnership with your organization in the past?

Other

- What is the hierarchy of your organization? Who do we need permission from in order to proceed and who are the best contacts to meet with as this partnership develops?
- What is the best way to communicate with you?
- What are your expectations in a partner?
- What is required of our staff to work with your youth (training, screening, etc.)?
- How is your program marketed?
- What is your hope in partnering with us?

While assessing your potential partner, you may come up with additional ideas and thoughts during your meeting and be able to share these fluidly. If you need time to process the answers to these questions make sure to set up a follow-up meeting, preferably either before you leave or the same week as your initial meeting.

Step 3: Tips for Success

Once you find the right partner, building the proper foundation is important. Here are some tips as referenced by Spero-Swingle and Shephard (2016) in *Together...*

We Can! Achieving Successful Partnerships (https://healthy-food-choices-in-schools.extension.org/together-we-can-achieving-successful-partnerships/).

- Be patient. Sometimes an organization is eager to work with you, but there may be unforeseen circumstances that delay the start of a program, or it may have protocol you don't know about that must be followed.
- Share the credit. Organizations that work together need to share in the successes. Otherwise, it won't be a mutually beneficial partnership.
- Determine if a Memorandum of Understanding/Agreement (MOU/MOA) is necessary for the partnership. Organizations differ in their requirements. Check who in your organization can approve an MOU/MOA—typically a dean, director, or similar.
- Make sure expectations are clear if you are planning to apply for a grant through this partnership. Have expectations and agreements in writing to decrease disappointments and increase the probability the partnership will remain intact.
- Reflect annually on your partnership by scheduling a meeting at the end of the program year or before the start of the new program year. This reflection will help address any issues that may prevent continuity or growth.
- Don't be afraid to say "no" if you can't deliver what your partner requests. Sometimes it is better to hold off on an expansion in your partnership until both organizations have a healthier balance of resources.

Partnerships build community support and sustainability. Keep these goals in mind to keep your partnership on track. Enjoy the opportunities partners bring, the resources they add, and the ability to grow your program in valuable ways.

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