# A Model for Building School–Family–Community Partnerships: Principles and Process

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# A Model for Building School–Family–Community Partnerships: Principles and Process

Julia Bryan and Lynette Henry

■The extant literature documents the importance of school counselors' roles in school–family–community partnerships, yet no model exists to guide school counselors through the process of building partnerships. The authors propose a model to help school counselors navigate the process and principles of partnerships. They define partnerships; discuss the principles of democratic collaboration, empowerment, social justice, and strengths focus that should infuse partnerships; enumerate a partnership process model; and discuss implications for practice and research.

*Keywords:* school–family–community partnerships, parent involvement, empowerment, social justice, democratic collaboration

A critical need exists for collaboration among counselors, teachers, parents, and other school stakeholders (Bryan, 2005; Trusty, Mellin, & Herbert, 2008). Research indicates that when a collective group of school, family, and community stakeholders work together, achievement gaps decrease (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). As part of this movement toward more collaborative and partnership-driven school reform initiatives, school counselors are key and can play a pivotal role. School counselors possess the leadership skills that equip them to form critical links between schools, families, and communities to foster academic achievement and students' resilience by engaging in various types of partnership interventions and roles (Bryan, 2005; Trusty et al., 2008).

The extant literature documents the importance of school counselors' roles in building school–family–community partnerships (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Griffin & Steen, 2010; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Trusty et al., 2008). Indeed, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2010) in its position statement on school–family–community partnerships endorsed school counselors' roles as advocate, facilitator, leader, liaison, and initiator in these partnerships. As testament to the firm grounding of school–family–community partnerships within the school counseling context, a special issue on school counselors' role in collaborating with schools, families, and communities has been published (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Furthermore, research indicates that school counselors consider partnerships as essential and report that they are involved in various partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Up to 40% of school counselors say they are involved in various partnerships (Griffin & Steen, 2010), and about 37% report having received training in developing and implementing partnerships (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). However, school counselors report that their involvement in partnerships is affected by a number of school and school counselor factors, namely, a collaborative school climate, school principal expectations, school counselor self-efficacy about partnerships, role perceptions, time constraints, and partnership-related training (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). A partnership process model may provide school counselors with a framework to help create the conditions that facilitate partnerships (i.e., a collaborative school climate, counselors' positive self-efficacy or role perceptions about partnerships) and overcome the constraints or barriers (e.g., lack of training, lack of time) that hinder their partnership involvement.

Despite the emerging literature and abundance of support regarding school counselor involvement in partnerships, we found no model that specifically guides school counselors through the step-by-step process of building school–family–community partnerships. In this article, we propose a process model of partnership building for school counselors to help them understand and navigate the steps and principles of partnerships in the school counseling context. The proposed model provides a framework that systematizes prior work on school counselors' roles in school–family–community partnerships. First, we define school–family–community partnerships, then we briefly describe the principles or values that should be embedded in effective partnerships. We follow this with a step-by-step discussion of the model for building these school–family–community partnerships in the school counseling context.

## ■Defining and Describing Partnerships

School–family–community partnerships are collaborative initiatives and relationships among school personnel, family members, and community members and representatives of

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community-based organizations such as universities, businesses, religious organizations, libraries, and mental health and social service agencies. Partners collaborate in planning, coordinating, and implementing programs and activities at home, at school, and in the community that build strengths and resilience in children to enhance their academic, personal, social, and college-career outcomes (Bryan, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Partnerships can amass the support, resources, skills, networks, and programs that are useful in helping school counselors provide responsive services to meet the numerous complex needs of the often large caseloads school counselors serve (ASCA, 2010). Partnership programs can also create the environments, relationships, and experiences that reduce risks, build social capital, increase academic achievement and attendance, decrease behavioral issues, enhance school climate, foster resilience, and create developmental assets for children and adolescents (ASCA, 2010; Benard, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Galassi & Akos, 2004). Indeed, the developmental assets framework and body of related research guide us to marshal the resources in schools, families, and communities to create schools, communities, and programs that build external and internal assets for youth (Benson, 2002; Galassi & Akos, 2004; Scales, 2005). Purposeful school–family–community partnerships activate opportunities for students to learn and opportunities for teachers to teach (Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001). Students gain opportunities to exercise leadership; learn problem-solving, prosocial, and other skills; and build bonds with adults in the school and the community. Teachers gain opportunities to learn about students' funds of knowledge and build relationships with students' other teachers, including family, mentors, and adult teachers in students' other spheres of influence (Honig et al., 2001).

Over the past 30 years, scholars have struggled to describe and classify the wide and varied activities that are umbrellaed under the term *school–family–community partnerships* (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Partnerships result in a wide range of programs and activities, each with different goals, challenges, and outcomes (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Walker, Shenker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Perhaps the most popular typology of partnerships is Epstein's (1995) six types of partnership involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (for a detailed description of each type in the school counseling context, see Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). More recently, Griffin and Steen (2010) studied Epstein's typology with school counselors and found a seventh type of partnership involvement for school counselors: leading. Leading reflects the leadership and advocacy roles school counselors play in facilitating the other six types of partnership involvement among school, family, and community members.

Further research revealed that school counselors' involvement in school–family–community partnerships is composed of three dimensions: (a) involvement in school–family partnerships, (b) involvement in school–community collaboration, and (c) involvement on collaborative teams (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). Involvement in school–family partnerships describes bridge-building and gap-closing activities designed to build relationships and understanding between school personnel and families and entails direct, hands-on services such as workshops for families and school personnel, home visits, and helping families to access services in the school and the community. Involvement in school–community collaboration consists of activities in which school counselors collaborate with community members and organizations (e.g., volunteers, businesses, mentors, tutors, and mental health and family counselors) to deliver support programs and services (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, and counseling) to students and families. Involvement on collaborative teams or interprofessional collaboration consists of partnership activities in which school counselors lead, coordinate, initiate, and collaborate on teams of professionals, parents, and community members (e.g., mental health team and partnership action team) to deliver services and care and implement programs for students and families.

Although well-intentioned partnerships exist in many schools, they often lack the qualities that would make them far reaching and lasting enough to help students overcome or cope with academic, social, and emotional difficulties that they face. Ideally, effective partnerships move beyond the traditional bake sale and Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) meeting to a process that engages school personnel, families, and community members in mutual and respectful collaboration and shared responsibility whereby they accomplish mutual goals and outcomes in a reciprocal relationship. Furthermore, rich and effective partnerships are built on a foundation of shared principles or values that enable a healthy collaboration process among partners and lead to improved success and access for students and their families, especially those who are less advantaged in schools.

## ◼ Principle-Based School–Family–Community Partnerships

Successful partnerships are intentionally infused with the principles of democratic collaboration; student, family, and community empowerment; social justice; and strengths focus (Bryan, 2005, 2009; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivary, 2001). Democratic collaboration means that school, student, family, and community partners have shared decision making, ownership, and responsibility for the partnership vision, goals, and outcomes. Together, partners define pressing student concerns, reach consensus on the need for partnership programs and events, expand the leadership of the partnership, engage the local and wider community, and focus on and implement the program(s). In schools, students' and families' voices are typically silenced, and programs and interventions are designed for rather than with students and families. In partnerships that embrace democratic collabora-

tion, school personnel share power with students, families, and community members and view them as equal and valuable experts in the children's education and the partnership process.

Democratic collaboration is inextricably linked to family and community empowerment. By empowerment, we mean that parents not only have equal voice but also participate in the decision making, planning, and implementation of solutions to problems affecting their children (Holcomb-McCoy & Bryan, 2010). Partnerships that are based on empowerment often involve students collaborating with adults to assess and describe their own needs, design and evaluate programs, and solve school problems that affect them (Mitra, 2009; Mitra & Gross, 2009). To foster family and community empowerment, school partners use the following principles: They intentionally involve culturally diverse and low-income parents and community members in the partnership process; purposefully diminish their roles as the "experts"; respect families' and community members' knowledge and insights; regard each other as valuable resources and assets; involve family and community members in mutual and equitable decisions about partnership goals, activities, and outcomes; refuse to blame each other; and encourage families and communities to define issues that affect their children (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2008).

Empowerment and social justice are intricately interrelated. Whereas empowerment focuses on increasing participation and voice for families in the partnership process and in their children's education, social justice focuses on increasing access to resources, information, skills, and knowledge for families (Nelson et al., 2001). Principle-based collaboration among counselors, students, families, and community members is a vital tool of social justice (Bryan, 2009; Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009). In social-justice-focused partnerships, counselors and other partners collaborate with traditionally marginalized students and families to intentionally develop quality programs that give students and families access to information and resources, such as advanced classes, health care, and academic enrichment and college planning programs. Partners also ensure that marginalized families participate in school and community decisions and policies, especially those that often affect their children negatively, such as disciplinary referral policies (Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012). Furthermore, in partnerships focused on social justice, partners intentionally tackle pressing social justice issues, such as closing achievement gaps, reducing disproportionate disciplinary referrals among affected student groups, providing in-school and out-of-school supports for students without them, and creating college access for underrepresented student groups. Relatedly, school counselors must be aware that families have different amounts of social capital that can be enhanced or further depleted by the relationships that counselors build with families and their children (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-

McCoy, 2011). Social capital refers to social networks and norms that facilitate trust and the ability of individuals to achieve goals and solve problems (Lin, 2000). Partnerships that embody the principle of social justice build social capital for families; that is, school, family, and community partners create programs and interventions that result in increased information and resource-rich relationships or networks of trust for children and families.

Finally, partnerships should be strengths based or strengths focused. Strengths-focused partnerships happen when partners focus on identifying, using, and enhancing strengths in children, families, and communities (Bryan, 2009; Bryan & Henry, 2008; Galassi & Akos, 2004; Scales, 2005). In strengths-focused partnerships, schools, families, and community partners foster the protective factors that build resiliency in children, namely, caring adult relationships, meaningful student participation in their schools and communities, and high expectations for students' success (Benard, 2004; Bryan & Henry, 2008). Strengths-focused partnerships produce strengths or developmental assets for children such as school bonding, social competencies, and caring school climates that decrease risky behaviors and enhance their chances of success (Benson, 2002; Galassi & Akos, 2004; Scales, 2005). To meet the needs of families and students, especially those who are traditionally marginalized, excluded, or hard to reach, school counselors need to use a strengths focus rather than a deficit perspective (Bryan & Henry, 2008).

## Process of Building School–Family–Community Partnerships

Although some of the partnership literature briefly delineates steps for building partnerships, we found few formal models that provided in-depth understanding of the partnership-building process (Doherty & Mendenhall, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Gray, 1985; Keys, Bemak, Carpenter, & King-Sears, 1998; Selin & Chavez, 1995; Waddock, 1989). These assorted partnership process models addressed different types of partnerships, such as social and public–private partnerships, and were found across diverse fields, including business (Waddock, 1989), tourism management and marketing (Selin & Chavez, 1995), human relations (Gray, 1985), family therapy (Doherty & Mendenhall, 2006), education (Epstein, 1995), and counseling (Keys et al., 1998). Except for Doherty and Mendenhall's (2006) model, which is not a stage model, some similarity exists across the partnership process models in the conceptualization and sequencing of the partnership stages, typically beginning with a meeting or coming-together stage and ending with an evaluation stage.

We build on these models to conceptualize a partnership process model specifically developed to incorporate partnership roles for school counselors and to systematize existing work on school counselor involvement in partnerships (ASCA, 2010; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Bryan

& Henry, 2008; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Trusty et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2010). The model presented in this article should help school counselors integrate culturally responsive, data-driven collaboration into comprehensive school counseling programs through the formation of principle-based school–family–community partnerships. When school counselors are able to identify and perform the tasks at each stage of the partnership-building process and recognize that they can develop more influential school counseling programs with the support of many partners, they may be more encouraged and motivated to build school–family–community partnerships. Next, we describe the partnership process model, followed by a brief discussion of the implications for practice and research.

## A Partnership Process Model for School Counseling

This comprehensive partnership model incorporates the critical tasks and questions that school counselors face at each stage of the process of building school–family–community partnerships (see Table 1). We propose a seven-stage partnership model as a road map for school counselors to help navigate this process (see Figure 1). The seven stages include (a) preparing to partner, (b) assessing needs and strengths, (c) coming together, (d) creating shared vision and plan, (e) taking action, (f) evaluating and celebrating progress, and (g) maintaining momentum. The stages overlap, and school counselors recycle through these stages as they continue to implement partnerships in their schools. The process is infused with the principles of democratic collaboration, empowerment, social justice, and a strengths focus that should lead to healthy collaboration between schools, families, and communities. Within this model, school counselors may be team leaders, facilitators, advocates, collaborators, and/or initiators in the partnership-building process (ASCA, 2010; Bryan, 2005; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Steen & Noguera, 2010). Furthermore, school counselors may enter the process at any stage (e.g., the second or third stage) and not necessarily the first stage. The time and effort devoted to each stage will vary with the needs of the school and the extent of the collaboration and partnerships that already exist among the school, families, and community members. We describe each stage of the partnership process model, including counselors' tasks at each stage.

### Preparing to Partner

Partnerships are attitude driven, vision driven, and data driven. Educators' attitudes about families and about partnerships determine how they treat and collaborate with families and affect partnership goals and outcomes (Bryan, 2005; Epstein, 1995; Walker et al., 2010). Negative attitudes on the part of school personnel will hinder strong school–family–community relationships, especially with families from traditionally marginalized backgrounds (Dotson-Blake, 2010; Epstein & Van Voorhis,

2010; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010; Walker et al., 2010). Building partnerships first demands an examination of one's own attitudes and beliefs about the students, families, and the community that one serves. First, counselors must examine what they believe about students' abilities and learning and about the students' families' attitudes toward learning. Furthermore, to build culturally responsive partnerships that are successful in meeting families' needs, school counselors must consider their own biases and stereotypes about students and families (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Although many counselors challenge their explicit biases, they may have implicit biases that affect their judgments about children and families who are different from themselves. Indeed, school counselors may find the Implicit Association Test (Boysen, 2010; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) valuable in examining their own implicit biases.

School counselors will find cultural reciprocity useful in examining their attitudes toward and their impact on families. Cultural reciprocity is a two-way process in which practitioners examine their own cultural assumptions underlying their practice with students and families, seek understanding of how families' values and assumptions differ from their own, respect families' cultural differences, and through counselor–family collaboration adapt and align their professional actions with those of families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997; Warger, 2001). Cultural reciprocity will result in better counselor–family relationships and in collaborative and culturally congruent goals for students.

Partnerships must be vision driven (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Doherty & Mendenhall, 2006). A critical step in preparing to partner involves developing a vision for partnerships and examining how partnerships can help realize both the school counseling program's and the school's visions. A critical task at this partnership stage comprises gaining buy-in from principals and other school staff. For example, aligning the vision for school counseling and for partnerships with the school's or principal's vision is one way to gain principal buy-in for partnerships and to influence principals' expectations regarding counselors' partnership roles (Bryan & Griffin, 2010).

Partnerships should be data driven. By this, we mean that school counselors should disaggregate and use the data on student outcomes and the needs of various student groups to demonstrate a rationale for partnership interventions. Furthermore, sharing research on the benefits of partnerships and data stories regarding the success of partnerships in similar schools will help school counselors win principal and staff buy-in (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Griffin, 2010). Additionally, school counselors should capitalize on opportunities such as faculty and administrator meetings, team meetings, and counselor-led faculty development workshops to share the school counseling vision, including the vision for partnerships, the benefits of partnerships, and stories of partnership successes at other schools as well as in their own school.

**TABLE 1**

**School–Family–Community Partnership Process Model**

| Stage and Main Tasks | Questions |
|---|---|
| **Preparing to Partner** | |
| **Where do I begin?**<br>1. Become familiar with the cultural groups served by the school and with the community.<br>2. Use the ASCA (2005) National Model, research, and your role as a school counselor in forming your vision.<br>3. Align your vision with the school's vision to get principal buy-in.<br>4. Use research-based evidence of how partnerships are fostering educational resilience and academic achievement. | 1. What are your beliefs, attitudes, and values about families?<br>2. What is your vision for the school counseling partnership?<br>3. What is the school's vision?<br>4. Why should the administration give you the opportunity to build partnerships? |
| **Assessing Needs and Strengths** | |
| **How do I identify the goals of the partnership?**<br>1. Conduct needs and strengths assessment surveys with students, all school personnel, parents/families, and community members.<br>2. Conduct face-to-face needs and strengths assessment. Talk to everyone.<br>3. Attend community events. Ask about cultural brokers and persons of influence.<br>4. Uncover existing partnerships and their effectiveness.<br>5. Create a community asset map. | 1. What are the needs and strengths of teachers, custodians, and so on?<br>2. What are the needs and strengths of parents and guardians?<br>3. What are the needs and strengths of the community members and organizations (e.g., nearby schools, places of worship)?<br>4. What partnerships already exist? What are they doing that works? |
| **Coming Together** | |
| **How do I bring partners together?**<br>1. Use identified strengths to create a PLT.<br>2. Examine identified needs and strengths.<br>3. Get the team's feedback and ideas.<br>4. Connect with potential partners, cultural brokers, and persons of influence.<br>5. Share with potential partners how they can help. | 1. Who are potential team members (who care passionately about students and parents)?<br>2. Who are your potential partners?<br>3. Who are the identified cultural brokers and persons of influence?<br>4. What is the role of the school counselor on the PLT? |
| **Creating Shared Vision and Plan** | |
| **How do I get everyone on board and on the same page?**<br>1. Use identified needs to create a partnership plan.<br>   a. Build on existing partnerships.<br>   b. Consider starting one new partnership.<br>2. Share the plan with everyone in school and get feedback and ideas.<br>3. Create a logic model.<br>4. Create a 1-year and 3- to 5-year plan.<br>5. Create a time line for the year's partnership activities. | 1. What strategies would you use to create a shared vision and plan?<br>2. What existing partnerships are already meeting identified needs?<br>3. Where would new partnerships be beneficial in meeting identified needs?<br>4. How will you get buy-in from staff?<br>5. What are your goals and expected outcomes? |
| **Taking Action** | |
| **What will we do and how will we do it?**<br>1. Delegate responsibilities based on the PLT's and your partners' strengths.<br>2. Implement partnership activities according to the time line.<br>3. Plan for challenges you expect, but implement anyway.<br>4. Involve the media. | 1. What strategies/partnerships would you and the team use to implement the plan?<br>2. What is the time line and implementation plan?<br>3. How will you overcome any barriers and challenges you expect in implementing your plan?<br>4. What are the benefits of involving the media? |
| **Evaluating and Celebrating Progress** | |
| **How will I measure our success?**<br>1. Determine how you will evaluate each partnership.<br>2. Measure and evaluate the results of each partnership implemented.<br>3. Share accomplishments with the administration, teachers, other staff, students, families, and the community.<br>4. Celebrate partners and accomplishments. | 1. How will you measure and evaluate each partnership to show the results/outcomes?<br>2. What difference did the partnership make? What worked? What did not work?<br>3. How will you celebrate your partners or accomplishments? |

**TABLE 1 (*Continued*)**

**School–Family–Community Partnership Process Model**

| Stage and Main Tasks | Questions |
|---|---|
| **Maintaining Momentum** | |
| **How will I sustain this partnership?** | 1. What strategies will you use to improve or build on the partnerships? |
| 1. Revisit your plan. | 2. How will you sustain the partnerships? |
| 2. Use evaluation results to improve the plan. | 3. Who are the new team members and partners? |
| 3. Get the PLT's feedback to improve and make revisions to the plan. | |
| 4. Share the new plan with your students, families, and community partners. | |
| 5. Contact your partners prior to and early in the school year. Consider extensions of existing partnerships. | |
| 6. Identify possible new team members and new partners as new staff and parents come to the school every year. | |

*Note.* ASCA = American School Counselor Association; PLT = partnership leadership team.

## Assessing Needs and Strengths

The second critical step in the process of building partnerships consists of assessing the needs and strengths of students, families, and the community and how students and families experience the school's climate. School counselors may conduct assessments with the assistance of parent and staff volunteers or with a partnership leadership team (PLT) if one already exists. Thorough assessment of needs and strengths provides school counselors and PLTs with important data to identify program goals and develop appropriate partnership programs and interventions that address the identified needs of students and families in a manner that uses the strengths of all stakeholders.
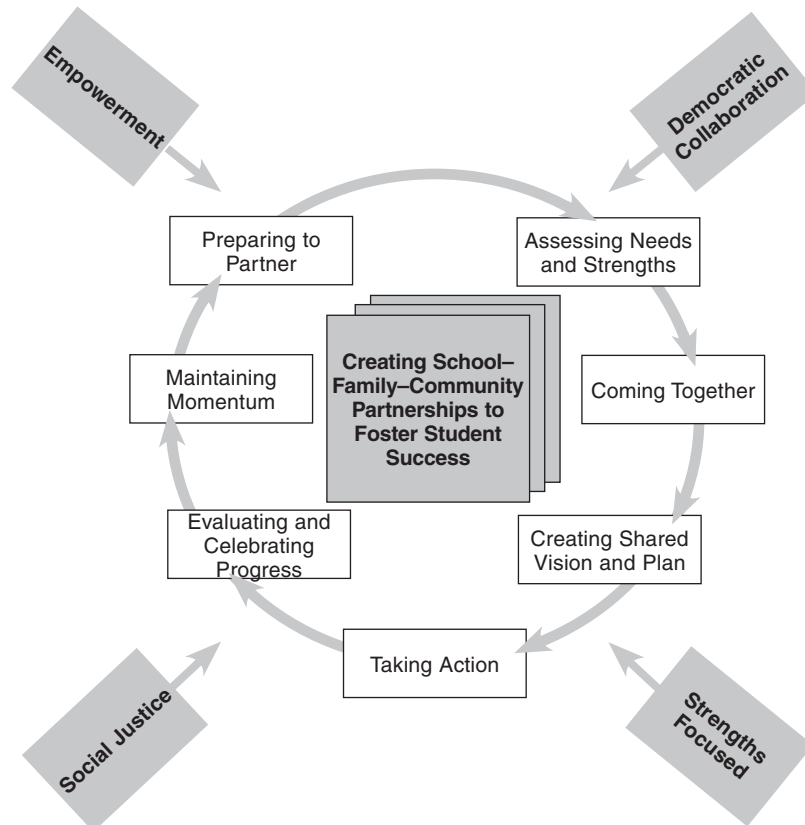


**FIGURE 1**

**Seven-Stage Partnership Process Model Illustrating the Process of Building School–Family–Community Partnerships**

More specifically, needs assessment identifies specific student and family groups that need to be served and the school, family, and community barriers that need to be addressed so that students can succeed. Strengths assessment identifies existing partnership programs, assets, and potential partners in the school, families, and community and uncovers valuable community resources such as community liaisons and cultural brokers (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). By cultural brokers, we mean people who are acculturated into mainstream culture, share or understand the culture (e.g., around race, ethnicity, immigration, and income) of family members with whom school personnel are trying to partner, are sensitive to the values and beliefs of families, and help interpret the school's culture to family members and vice versa (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Dotson-Blake, 2010; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). Cultural brokers can play an instrumental role in helping school counselors connect with families who are not typically vocal and in enhancing trust between school counselors and families. They can also help identify and marshal community resources. School counselors may find the tool of community asset mapping useful in helping them identify strengths and assets in the school's local and wider community (Griffin & Farris, 2010; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

School counselors must make every effort to elicit feedback from parents, especially those who are not involved in the traditional forms of parent involvement typically present in schools, such as PTAs. In addition to gathering feedback from representative samples of students, parents and guardians, and community members, school counselors should try to capture representative perspectives from administration, teachers, custodial and office staff, and student services personnel, such as school psychologists, social workers, nurses, school resource officers, and parent liaisons, as well as from collaborative teams, such as response to intervention, crisis intervention, and mental health teams and counseling professionals with whom school counselors collaborate.

Strategies for conducting needs and strengths assessments and school climate assessments include written and online surveys, focus groups, and formal or informal face-to-face interviews with students, school personnel, and family and community members. Other strategies for reaching a wide range of perspectives include attending teacher team meetings, setting up a booth at other area schools' open houses and community fairs, holding parent meetings at school and in the community, making telephone calls to parents and community members, and making visits to homes and community events.

As school counselors gather data, it is important to ask questions that elicit strengths from school staff and parents and affirm them for their existing work and strengths. Needs are much easier to elicit than strengths in schools because school personnel often focus on deficits rather than strengths in working with families (Bryan & Henry, 2008). A strengths focus mandates that counselors observe what is already working, which individuals are already reaching out to families

and students, and individuals' enthusiasm about children and their willingness to help. Such cues will help school counselors identify potential partners, cultural brokers, and team members.

## Coming Together

Most partnership models begin at the coming-together stage when one partner convenes or initiates a meeting among potential partners (Epstein, 1995; Gray, 1985; Selin & Chavez, 1995; Waddock, 1989). Although some school counselors may start or enter the partnership process at this stage by invitation or design, school counselors should spend time preparing to partner and assessing needs and strengths prior to convening or joining with a PLT. This preparation should lead to more culturally responsive, data-driven, and outcomes-based collaboration.

School counselors cannot effectively build partnerships alone (Bryan & Henry, 2008). An important step in building partnerships is creating a PLT that takes responsibility for developing, implementing, evaluating, and maintaining the school's partnership plan and program; recruiting other partners and leaders; creating and spreading the partnership vision; and sustaining partnership programs (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). This stage of bringing partners together is critical regardless of how small or large the partnership vision is. If a PLT does not already exist, school counselors can, in collaboration with the school principal(s), take the lead in initiating one or serve as a member or an adviser to the PLT. They can collaborate with the team to implement a comprehensive program of partnerships; conduct yearly student and family strengths and needs assessments; communicate and disseminate information about partnership plans and activities; and coordinate, facilitate, and evaluate partnership activities.

The PLT provides school counselors with invaluable support and assistance in building partnerships, especially when the aim is to develop comprehensive schoolwide partnerships designed to tackle complex problems that hinder student success. A comprehensive program encompasses a range of school, family, and community partnerships, such as parent education and family support; active home–school communication; family members and community members who act as volunteers and mentors in the school; strategies that foster children's academic, personal, and social development at home and at school; decision making, advisory council, and governance mechanisms; and myriad kinds of school–family–community collaborations (Epstein, 1995; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Steen & Noguera, 2010).

The team should comprise about eight to 15 members, including an administrator, teachers, family members, guardians, students, and community members and community mental health professionals. School counselors should make sure that the PLT includes diverse partners and parents who are representative of the cultural groups in the school rather

than the few people in the school who are usually on every team or committee (Dotson-Blake, 2010; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). The initial tasks of the PLT include assessing, synthesizing, and analyzing the needs and strengths assessments data and school climate data; brainstorming about strategies for meeting identified needs; and using the data to develop a partnership plan with short- and long-term goals and outcomes. School counselors' knowledge of the research on partnerships and what works to enhance academic achievement and address cultural, social, college, and career needs will be crucial in helping the team develop a plan that is aligned with students' needs (Steen & Noguera, 2010). Furthermore, team members will play an active role in helping to identify and contact potential family and community partners who can help them implement programs, garner support on partnership initiatives, and develop a comprehensive partnership plan for building partnerships between the school, family, and community.

The team should always be on the lookout for potential leaders and volunteers to help with the joint work of partnerships and provide a broad base of support for the partnership program. In rural and urban economically depressed areas, this may mean looking for community partners beyond the immediate surrounding community to find partners in businesses, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, colleges, and mental health professionals in wider communities. Community-based mental health and family counselors can be valuable partners in helping develop and implement programs that meet students' and families' health and education needs. However, school, family, and community counselors will need to have initial discussions about each other's roles in the partnership and the school so that territorialism and turf wars do not impede the partnership process. Partners should also include students, who can provide important insights that help lead to change. Students' perspectives and participation can fuel improvements in classroom practice, instructions, teacher–student relationships, and educational outcomes as they highlight problems in the school and classroom culture that school personnel avoid or fail to see (Mitra, 2009).

### Creating Shared Vision and Plan

Once initial partners are identified and a PLT is convened, the team can begin the work of crafting a partnership vision and goals. This stage of creating a shared vision and plan is critical to the success and sustenance of partnerships (Alexander et al., 2003). School counselors' presence on partnership teams helps facilitate healthy communication that is essential for building strong partnerships (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). Culturally responsive, social-justice-focused PLTs will intentionally involve family and community members who are different from the middle-class majority culture of many schools. On such diverse teams, school counselors should be especially intentional about building consensus, a shared vision, and shared and equal decision making.

School counselors' group counseling and team facilitation skills will prove fundamental in facilitating consensus building and shared vision and plans. School counselors can use their group counseling skills and knowledge of task group work to help the team establish open dialogue and healthy group norms of listening respectfully, valuing one another's opinions, being nonjudgmental and understanding, and respecting the views of diverse people with different experiences. Healthy dialogue creates space for communication about critical issues, process, goals, and outcomes and facilitates collective understandings that form the basis for informed decision making and action plans (Ryan, 2005). Dialogue is the starting point for collaboration and an initial forum in which cultural understanding and trust is created, diversity is respected and accommodated, and school–family–community differences are bridged. School counselors should also guide the team to develop strategies for managing and solving conflicts, which are an inevitable part of any collaborative efforts.

Team meetings will be more productive when school counselors help establish a strengths focus by promoting team discussions that highlight the strengths of students, families, and communities. This may involve encouraging PLT members to reframe their comments about families and school personnel so they focus on strengths rather than deficits (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Furthermore, as PLT members and other partners negotiate their roles and responsibilities in implementing a program or activity, school counselors should help them identify their strengths strategically so that team members are responsible for areas that match their strengths.

To ensure shared understandings, the PLT should develop group rules about the frequency and time of meetings, methods of communication with one another, and sharing of responsibilities. Given the busy schedules of school counselors, teachers, parents and guardians, and community members, PLT meetings should be few and at convenient times for family and community members, which may not be during school hours. Much of the team's communication may be done outside of meetings, by phone or e-mail, with designated team members acting as liaisons to connect with each member to ensure consensus and clarity about agreed-on roles and responsibilities in preparing for and implementing a planned partnership event or program.

The team should have a 1-year plan as well as a 3- or 5-year plan, including a time line (Epstein, 1995). A 3- or 5-year plan allows time to implement, evaluate, and revamp programs as necessary. The 1-year plan should be based on partnership events and programs that can be realistically implemented in the immediate school year. School counselors should encourage team members to start small by building on existing partnership programs and start new partnership programs one by one. Furthermore, partnership plans should have clear, feasible, and measurable goals linked to academic and other student outcomes, such as reducing the achievement

gap, increasing college-going rates, improving attendance and school climate, and reducing the number of suspensions and behavior referrals.

Logic models can be invaluable in helping PLTs develop a shared vision and plan with clear, feasible, and measurable goals and outcomes (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). The logic model is a useful tool for program planning and evaluation, as well as for building consensus or common understandings about the goals, activities, and short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes of a program. Building a logic model requires the team to work together to create a chart or picture of the program and how it works. The model explicates the program assumptions, goals, resources or inputs, activities, expected outputs, outcomes, and ways to measure them.

A warm and welcoming school climate and invitations to families and community members are central to successful school–family–community partnerships (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Walker et al., 2010). Therefore, the partnership plan should include strategies for improving school climate and culturally sensitive strategies for reaching parents and family members who are currently uninvolved or have lower levels of involvement in the school (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Dotson-Blake, 2010; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

School counselors can play a critical role in helping to spread the vision so that it eventually becomes a shared school–family–community vision. Spreading the vision involves recruiting and engaging school staff, families, and community stakeholders in implementing the partnership activities. Integral to spreading the vision is recognizing, affirming, and relying on stakeholders' strengths and involving them in ways that match their strengths. Working alongside the PLT to implement partnership interventions, these partners provide a broad base of support for partnership ventures and may be potential future PLT members.

### Taking Action

Taking action is the stage at which the PLT collaborates with other partners to implement the plan for one or more partnership activities or programs. At this point, the school counselor or team leader may convene a meeting to ensure that each member knows what her or his role and responsibilities are and is carrying it out. By this stage, the leadership team should have successfully built a shared vision and plan detailing what partnership activities the team will implement; developed a time line for implementing each activity; and located and involved other school, family, and community partners in implementing the plan. Every parent as well as community member constitutes a potential partner to help implement the process and serves as prospective leaders of partnership initiatives.

School counselors and other leadership team members will need to make an earnest commitment to implement the partnership event or program. Although it is essential that they plan for setbacks, they must focus on implementing the plan regardless of setbacks. At the end of the event or at some point in the program cycle, there will be time for evaluation and further improvement. It is imperative to concentrate on and build on successes regardless of how small they are. If the partnership activity is a parent education workshop and only 10 parents attend, that is a small success; small successes have a snowball effect (Doherty & Mendenhall, 2006). Not only do parents who attended the activity benefit, but leadership teams can recruit the parents to help identify barriers to the activity's success and get the word out for the next parent education workshop.

Finally, school counselors should consider involving the media as a way of recruiting potential partners and publicizing the school and its families in a positive light. This will involve reminding the media contacts of the event, assigning someone to greet and escort them, and making space for them. Positive media is especially important in urban or economically depressed areas where schools typically receive negative media attention.

### Evaluating and Celebrating Progress

Evaluating the partnership's programs and activities is an integral but often neglected part of the partnership process (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Program evaluation provides the team and all stakeholders with a sense of what has worked and what needs to be improved. The process should be intentionally democratic, that is, inclusive of school, family, and community partners so that the school alone does not wield the power in deciding what will be measured, what data will be collected, and how the information will be used. PLTs should consider the empowering effects of including students in designing, implementing, and evaluating partnership activities and programs (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mitra, 2009; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

This inclusiveness of students, family, and community stakeholders in evaluation research is one aspect of democratic evaluation (Ryan, 2005). Democratic evaluation is an extension of democratic collaboration. All stakeholders are included in defining the purpose of the evaluation, evaluating the program's quality, interpreting the data, making recommendations, and determining how to disseminate the findings. This process creates opportunity for dialogue that clearly depicts the ideas and interests of students, families, and community members (Ryan, 2005).

From the outset, the PLT should develop a systematic approach to evaluate each program the team implements and celebrate progress. Evaluation will be most effective if the team begins with a logic model. Walking through the logic model process from the outset of the partnership process will lead to evaluation results that are relevant and useful (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). The evaluation focus should be on measuring program effects on learning, school climate,

and other student outcomes. The team will need to decide what measures or tools will be used to collect data, who will collect data for each program or activity, and at what intervals during the academic year. Evaluation should use quantitative and qualitative data to answer questions such as the following: Were the needs identified by the needs assessment met? What difference did the partnership activity make in helping the team reach the program's goals? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the process used in implementing the program? How are students, families, the school, and the community different as a result of the partnerships?

If the team plans to implement a mentoring program and program goals include reducing behavioral referrals or increasing attendance, then the team must have a plan for measuring behavioral referral and attendance rates of mentees prior to entering the program and at planned intervals during the program, for example, at the end of each quarter and at the end of the school year. If the team developed the mentoring program and is responsible for the mentors, the team should also have a plan for evaluating mentor effectiveness. If the program is run by a community organization (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters), the team should collaborate with the organization to examine the impact of the program.

The team should meet to examine and analyze evaluation data during the last few weeks of the semester. The data should be analyzed and presented in easily understood forms (e.g., charts, stories) to faculty and staff, the school board, and other stakeholders either at the end of the school year or at the beginning of the next school year. Simple numerical tables and charts as well as selected quotes from feedback can help to tell vivid stories about the outcomes of the partnership program, who benefited, and how they benefited. School counselors should focus on presenting data responsibly so that they do not create or reinforce deficit perspectives of students, their families, and communities and so that they highlight social justice issues such as a lack of access to school and community resources and experiences that enhance student success and that are more readily available in more affluent schools, families, and communities.

PLTs should celebrate their progress and accomplishments as well as the work of all partners who contributed, especially the most resistant persons who came through and helped in the end. Expressions of thanks should be done publicly as well as privately through thank-you notes, letters, e-mails, and celebrations. In particular, business and community partners appreciate thank-you cards made personally by students. Furthermore, school counselors should credit other counselors, faculty, parents, and team members for their ideas. School counselors and the leadership team should use various strategies to celebrate family and community partners, for example, Success Night celebrations when all partners, parents, and community members are invited guests (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Success Night celebrations provide an opportunity to give awards and recognition publicly to

parents and other partners and to have the students perform as a way of saying thank you. Feeling valued and significant may encourage partners to maintain their involvement in school–family–community partnerships.

## Maintaining Momentum

One of the toughest challenges in partnership building is maintaining or sustaining the partnership, that is, keeping it going and getting stronger from year to year. Sustainability should be a key consideration in partnership building because a lack of sustainability can lead to partners' pessimism and reluctance to engage in the future in what may be perceived as wasted efforts (Alexander et al., 2003). Partners are most beneficial to students, families, schools, and communities if the benefits accrued can be sustained over time. Partnership sustainability is especially important in high-poverty, high-minority communities where there tend to be instability and inconsistency in services provided. The PLT should examine the maintenance of school–family–community partnerships against this backdrop.

Alexander et al. (2003) identified five characteristics important to maintaining partnerships: (a) outcomes-based advocacy or the sharing and celebration of the partnership's short-term accomplishments with all stakeholders; (b) vision-focused balance or agreement of partners on long-term vision, goals, and actions; (c) a systems orientation in which problems and solutions are seen as resulting from all systems, that is, school, families, and communities; (d) infrastructure development or the ability to establish an internal structure that fosters partners' participation, develops current and new leaders, and shares roles and responsibilities equally; and (e) community linkages or strong inclusive connections with community members in which their input and feedback are valued. Therefore, the PLT's investment in the partnership process up to this point is integral, that is, in building the team's structure and creating a shared vision, goals, and responsibilities; developing democratic collaboration and a shared power structure involving all school, family, and community stakeholders; and identifying, engaging, and mentoring potential leaders who can join the work.

To sustain or maintain the partnership's momentum into the next academic year, the PLT should plan for next year's partnership prior to the end of the academic year. Informed by the results of the evaluation, the PLT should discuss strategies for improving the partnership programs and formulate a plan for the next school year. The goals of planning ahead include keeping existing connections going, extending what is working, revamping what is not working, and gathering new and fresh ideas from partners. Recruiting new leaders and partners on an ongoing basis and especially toward the end of the school year is crucial to the longevity of a school's partnership programs. Continuous and intentional recruitment and mentoring of potential leaders ensure that the partnerships go on even if many of the previous team members leave.

Therefore, school counselors and other team members must intentionally recruit and engage new team members and partners from staff, families, and the community.

The team may formulate some tentative events for the next school year, such as a retreat for the PLT or a welcome-back breakfast for old and new partners. At the beginning of each school year, it is important to reconvene the PLT with new and old members, revisit the vision and plan, reassess needs and strengths, and develop and share new plans with school staff, students, families, and community partners. Ultimately, school counselors and leadership teams will cycle and recycle through the partnership process each year. However, implementing this model in which the PLT, and not school counselors or one school individual, has sole responsibility for the partnership program should help to maintain the longevity of the partnership program.

## Implications for Practice

The partnership process model presented in this article provides a guide or road map for school counselors and potentially for other school and community professionals as they seek to build partnerships to meet the needs of children and adolescents. Implementing this model requires school counselors to step beyond traditional roles and outside of their comfort zones, beyond the office and school walls, to reach out to parents and community members and organizations and thoughtfully and intentionally incorporate democratic collaboration, empowerment, social justice, and a strengths focus in their partnership work. School counselors will need to recognize that although partnerships may be initially time consuming, they yield substantive benefits, such as providing a web of support and increased resources for the school counseling program and increased opportunities and interventions to meet larger numbers of students' needs. If school counselors recognize that partnerships build asset-rich environments and programs that enhance children's success, they will likely invest the time in them (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Bryan & Henry, 2008). However, school counselors must recognize that partnerships take place more readily in some school environments. Research indicates that a collaborative school climate and the school principal's expectations are related to whether school counselors build partnerships. Therefore, as groundwork to building partnerships, school counselors may need to initially implement strategies that address the collaborative ethos of the school climate and their principal's expectations of their roles (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). Finally, implementing this partnership model will require school counselors to have a strong sense of self-efficacy and understand and embrace their professional roles and identity as leader and collaborator in the school.

## Implications for Research

It is important to note that specific conditions and factors influence the partnership-building process. A number of studies have uncovered school and school counselor factors that may promote or act as barriers in the partnership process (Bryan & Griffin, 2010; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). However, further research is needed to examine the family and community factors or conditions that promote or hinder the partnership-building process. Research is also needed to determine whether the partnership process works differently in different types of schools (e.g., whether the model varies or has different effects in affluent vs. less affluent schools, in rural vs. urban and suburban schools, or in racially homogeneous vs. heterogeneous schools) or whether school counselors find it more efficient or effective to use this model versus another partnership process model or no specific model at all. The partnership process model lends itself to action research (Rowell, 2005), community-based participatory research (Doherty & Mendenhall, 2006), and youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), approaches that are all conducted with rather than on students, families, and community members. These approaches are particularly useful for researchers who wish to address persistent community and social problems, such as academic failure, health problems, and limited college access. Indeed, counselor researchers must ensure that they use culturally sensitive research approaches in studying culturally diverse children, schools, and communities, especially in urban settings. Finally, questions remain about the sustainability and effects or outcomes of partnership programs that use this partnership process model compared with other approaches.

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