

Getting through: How to reach new partners

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“Business people won’t talk about child care.”

“The state says it has no money.”

“The city council only cares about K-12.”

“We tried to get business involved but nobody came to our meeting.”

“We gave grants to form partnerships, but they didn’t do it.”

“Nobody really cares about this problem but us.”

Sound familiar? Everywhere you turn, the expectation, the plan, the goal, maybe the requirement, is to form partnerships. Most of us know we *should* create or be involved in public-private partnerships if we’re going to achieve our goals for high quality, affordable child care and early education. Many of us have tried to use partnership strategies with little or no success. How can you make this strategy work for your community, county...a whole state?

The decade of the 90s brought the term *public-private partnership* into common usage. But this term is more than just a popular “buzz word.” Indeed, public-private partnerships are proving to be the one solution that surmounts the decades-old challenges we face in the early education profession. So, what are they and how can you make one work for you and the families in your city, county, or state?

According to *A Guide to Successful Public-Private Partnerships for Child Care* (Child Care Bureau, 2000), “A public-private partnership exists when the public sector (federal, tribal, state, and/or local officials and agencies) joins with the private sector (employers, philanthropies, media, civic groups, families, and service providers) in pursuit of a common goal.” Although each partnership is unique in its membership and structure, they all share two other common characteristics. First, each partner contributes time, money, expertise or other resources to the partnership. Second, decision-making and management responsibilities are shared among the partners.

But partners can’t share decision-making, management, or resources unless they first come together as partners. Why doesn’t this happen? There are, it’s true, many successful public-private partnerships across the country working on early childhood issues. However, there are many more that have not been formed or have not achieved what they hoped to. According to *10 Tips for Getting and Keeping Business Involved: An Illustrated Guide for Early Childhood Leaders* (O’Donnell and McJunkin, 2001), these unsuccessful efforts are often the result of “some very common and easily avoided misunderstandings.”

Lining up some of the 10 principles for successful partnerships from *A Guide to Successful Public-Private Partnerships for Child Care* against the tips from O’Donnell and McJunkin generates four beginning lessons for those who

seek to develop successful partnerships. Think of these lessons as a sort of road map to avoid some of the common misunderstandings that prevent partnerships' success.

Lesson #1. Know what results you want and how each partner you approach can have their needs met by those results. Two common missteps many of us make in seeking partners are 1) to see them as solutions to our problems and 2) to assume that our cause is inherently good and worthy of their support. If, instead, we approach partners with solutions that help them meet their needs, they are more likely to join us in common cause.

Lesson #2. Don't assume money is the only resource of value. O'Donnell and McJunkin advise in their Tip 3, "Know what to ask for." Ultimately, financial resources will certainly be necessary if a community will improve the quality and availability of early education. However, many other resources can be of high value, especially in the early stages of partnership development. Consider the value of donated legislative advocacy, publicity, connection to influential leaders, printing services, consultation and technical assistance, meeting space, and knowledge for starters. In fact, *really* consider the value of these resources and consider them "in-kind" matches when you apply for funding.

Lesson #3. Use the right spokespersons and the right language. If your area of expertise is early education or child care, don't assume you can "speak business" or "speak government." If an early childhood leader goes to a business leader and starts tossing child care jargon about, he will lose her interest very quickly. Hire business or government expertise onto your staff or learn enough of their language to find a fluent partner to serve as your translator. Peer-to-peer recruitment of new partners works best because of shared language and culture.

Lesson #4. Communicate, communicate, communicate. To sustain partners commitments once they are made, 360-degree communication – in all directions and from all directions – is essential. Communicate your progress toward desired results to the partners and to the public. Communicate to the public about the contributions of the partners – give them credit and recognition for their work. Seek input from partners and from all those who have an interest in your work – the stakeholders.

Developing a successful partnership is certainly not easy. Fortunately, it's not impossible, either. When we work with a child, whether as parent or teacher, and the child is not successful, we often try another approach because giving up is not an option. If we are to succeed in achieving high quality environments for young children, giving up is, likewise, not an option. Maybe you've "been there and done that" – tried unsuccessfully to establish a productive public-private partnership – and are saying "Partners? Where?" Don't give up – try another approach. Use the road map provided by these four lessons. Seek more information and build your skills and knowledge. You may soon find that you have partners everywhere!

For more information on developing public-private partnerships, see the free technical assistance resources from the National Child Care Information Center at www.nccic.org/ccpartnerships.

References

- The Child Care Partnership Project. (2000). *A guide to successful public-private partnerships for child care*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Child Care Bureau.
- O'Donnell, N. S., and McJunkin, C. (2001). *10 tips for getting and keeping business involved: An illustrated guide for early childhood leaders*. New York: Families and Work Institute.