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### Fostering Inclusive Culture through Partnerships with Nonprofits


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## Objectives or Purposes

In 2018, the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards were released to replace the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) 2011 Standards, guiding educational leadership preparation programs with “clear and consistent standards” (Preparing for the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Review: A Companion Guide, 10). Of particular significance with the release of the NELP Standards are two new foci. First, the NELP Standards deviate from previous sets of standards in that they address not just the needs of students, but rather “the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult” (Preparing for the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Review: A Companion Guide, 13). Additionally, the NELP Standards place a particular emphasis on “the leaders’ responsibility for the well-being of students and staff as well as their role in working with others to create supportive and inclusive district and school cultures” (Preparing for the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Review: A Companion Guide, 14). This concept, that of working with others to create inclusive district and school cultures, necessarily means that school leaders are required to look at organizations and leaders in the community to foster positive growth. Additionally, there is a distinct call to school leaders to not only focus on the learning of the students that are entrusted to them, but also to consider the learning of everyone in the school community. Because of this, there is a fertile ground upon which to investigate the benefits of partnerships with other nonprofit organizations in a school district.

In many ways, public schools are the most prevalent non-private, community-based organizations in society. This concept was assumed, at least traditionally, until the introduction of competition with public schools began in the 1980s. Now, with the prevalence of vouchers, charter schools, private and parochial schools, and other competitors for the finite resources that were once only allocated to public schools, it has become more essential than ever that school leaders, even those who are “freshly minted,” understand and develop the leadership skills necessary to thrive in a competition-oriented, community-based environment. This is especially important because of the significant role that schools play in teaching values, customs, and norms (in addition to state and national standards) to the children in communities, especially in rural communities cannot be overstated.

## Perspectives or Theoretical Framework

As defined by Merriam Webster (Community, n.d.), a community is a “unified body of...people with common interests living in a particular area.” As members of a community, not-for-profit businesses have both a stake and a vested interest in the local school’s effectiveness. While not-for-profit organizations struggle with ambiguity in purpose (Young, 2013), one can reasonably assert that K-12 education is fundamentally focused on ensuring students are exposed to and able to acquire a reasonable mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in the society they will eventually lead. Given the reality that nonprofit organizations are designed for service to the public (Nonprofit (n.d.)), schools and some nonprofits may find that shared efforts are mutually supportive toward the accomplishment of distinct organizational goals. This assertion is supported by research showing that connecting Latino Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to public schools provides great support to the school’s ability to meet the needs of underserved students and gives the CBOs greater access to the populations they focus on serving (Osterling & Garza, 2004). With budget limitations for CBOs and for tax-payer funded public schools alike, partnerships that can maximize the impact of limited resources makes good sense. Moreover, Jonix, Bartholomay and Calkins (2016) assert that a collective action of leadership is critical for the success of community and economic development.

Of additional significance is the reality that schools do not operate in isolation. From the time of Getzels and Guba (1957), a large amount of research tended to view schools as operating in closed environments; that is, sealed off from their outside worlds. Today, however, according to Hoy and Miskel (2013), the issue of the type of environment in which schools operate is largely an open-systems argument. This concept, that organizations are both influenced and, at the same time, dependent upon their environments, has important meaning to the roles, duties, and responsibilities of school leaders. This is especially true in less populated areas. In fact, Mcmillian, Wolf, and Cutting (2015) found that the more rural an area, the more positive impact nonprofit organizations have on the local economy. Often, the public-school system is not only the largest nonprofit organization in a particular community, but it is also the largest employer as well.

Considering, among other things, the potential mutual benefit of these partnerships, this research seeks to develop a greater understanding of the perspectives of individuals who work in nonprofit organizations as

they relate to characteristics embodied by school leaders and guided by the NELP standards. Moreover, through a more robust understanding, educational leaders and prospective educational leaders will have additional data points in research from which to drive their individual processes and administrative decisions as they relate to interacting with other organizations in the community.

### **Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry**

Recognizing the importance of understanding the perspectives of not-for-profit representatives relative to community schools' decision making and activities, a literature search was executed using key words such as transparency, social justice, integrity, and ethical (behavior) as a conceptual grounding. Informed by the literature, a list of seven interview questions was developed and interviews were conducted with 18 not-for-profit representatives located across the state of Texas in urban, suburban and specifically rural locations.

### **Data Sources, Evidence, Objects, or Materials**

Interviews were conducted and the responses of those interviewed were collected in person and by email. Those collected in person were recorded by dictation or recorded (audio) and transcribed. The interview was an appropriate inquiry format because, according to Berg (2009), an interview is "a conversation with a purpose...to gather information." In this case, the purpose was to understand the perspectives of media professionals relative to community schools' decision making and activities. Participants for this study were chosen through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling occurs when the inquirer selects participants and sites for the study because they can purposefully provide an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2007).

The interview protocol used in data collection is listed below:

1. What attributes would characterize a school with which you would initiate a partnership? (Lumpkin, 2008; Reitzug, 2008)
2. As a leader in a nonprofit organization/business, how important is it to you that integrity be modeled by their teachers and school leaders? (Han, Park, & Jeong, 2013; Perego, 2013)
3. How would the failure of a school administrator to follow through with a promise affect your impression of the school? How can teaching students to follow through with promises affect an organization such as yours? (Kuck, 1997)

4. Not-for-Profit business are held to a higher level of accountability due to the fact that they are stewards for the community. What lessons can you pass on to school administrators so that all stakeholders know that the accounting and decision-making process involves integrity and ethical behavior? (Kuck, 1997)
5. What growth opportunities can you design for students that will provide them with service opportunities that make them empowered/active participants within the democratic system? (McQuillan, 2005)
6. How can the partnership and generalized trust between school and not-for-profit organizations be strengthened? Leithwood & Riehl, 2003)
7. What are the barriers to trust between a school and a not-for-profit that need to be understood and removed? (Bryk & Schneider, 2003)

### **Results and/or Substantiated Conclusions or Warrants for Arguments/Point of View**

Emergent themes in the responses are listed below in relation to each of the questions in the protocol. Because communities, and especially non-profits in communities, do not typically possess the strict chain of command that is found in private sector businesses (Jonix, Bartholomay, & Calkins, 2016), there exists a very robust field of opportunity for the development of community-minded partnerships with non-profit leaders assuming a central role.

- 1) Nonprofit leaders are open to partnerships with schools where the school leader reliably shows integrity. In order to be fully invested in a partnership, the respondents want to know that their partners in the school are reliable. Indicators of integrity included a positive treatment of teachers and students by school leadership. There was also an expectation that school leaders ensured a compatibility in organizational goals and purpose. This implies a school leader's knowledge of another nonprofit and their mission prior to approaching them to initiate a partnership. An additional concept is that of the importance of rallying around a cause that is important to multiple organizations. Several respondents referred to the importance of personal connections with individuals in any organization to being a key to success in working in partnerships.
- 2) Integrity is inseparable from a foundation of trust. According to one respondent "the service that you provide becomes obsolete once it is learned by the public that the organization has integrity issues." A

second respondent stated that “the magnifying glass is pretty powerful when talking about dollars given to nonprofits.” Another respondent highlighted the fact that integrity communicates accountability and professionalism which further engender trust. A particularly helpful rubric provided by one respondent for operationally measuring integrity consisted of the following questions: 1) Is it the truth? 2) Is it fair to all concerned? 3) Will it build goodwill and better friendships? And 4) Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

With regard to integrity and trust, an underlying theme developed among the respondents in which there is an expectation among the leaders of nonprofits that all will live to a very high standard. In other words, if one organization made poor choices, failed to properly complete background work or screenings on its employees, or otherwise violated the community’s trust, that instance would have negative impact on all of the nonprofits in the community.

- 3) Failure to follow through can irreparably damage a school’s credibility. In so doing, it can jeopardize the potential for future joint endeavors. One respondent stated “I would (be) leery to work with the school again and somewhat disappointed.” Interestingly, there were other opinions. One insightful respondent suggested “That is contingent on the reason for the failure. If it is beyond their control and they made a good faith effort to follow through then it’s understandable and shouldn’t affect the relationship at all.” According to respondents, determining whether the failure was attributable to uncontrollable factors or to lack of commitment could be facilitated by good communication. The implication seems to be that effective communication is vital.

Another respondent indicated that “administrators sign on in name only. Really, the work is getting done in the lower levels.” Clearly, this statement has huge implications on the importance of several leadership theories, including (but not limited to) servant leadership, shared leadership and distributive leadership.

- 4) Individuals in non-school, not-for-profit organizations believe they have value to add to schools. Because many nonprofit organizations serve in niche markets/needs, they have honed very specific skills. An overarching theme among the respondents was that of a desire to “help and serve others in the community,” “a passion to help others.” A leader for one organization focused on disease research asserted that while their organization is “not publicly traded, but we

are publicly held.” Within that culture is an acknowledgement that fiscal transparency is vital. Another discussed the cultivation of an ability to share decision making with broad stakeholder groups. Others addressed the importance of exposing students to organizations (e.g., Girl and Boy Scouts, church groups) that foster a service orientation. Given the opportunity, nonprofit leaders believe they add value to school partners. This concept of the importance of philanthropy and volunteerism was repeated throughout the interviews. In many ways, leaders of other nonprofit organizations see public schools as partners in teaching the values of volunteerism and seeing those in public schools as partners who have this “higher calling.”

- 5) Nonprofit leaders are excited about the possibility of providing “a growth activity that students can get involved with in order to build self-esteem and empowerment.” In order to directly build capacity in students, nonprofit leaders expressed a desire to offer students orientation and experiences. Orienting students to the nonprofit’s organization and real needs in the community gives them an opportunity to explore how and where they have a heart to help others. Experiences in serving give students an opportunity to build practical skills while making a real difference.
- 6) According to the respondents, in order to foster trust, both parties should commit to active engagement and candor. Illustrating these ideas, one respondent stated that trust would be characterized by regular attendance in meetings and participation in activities which bring shared benefits such as during the donation gathering process (assuming that is the nature of the partnership). At another point, this respondent discussed how important it is that the approaching school knows its goals for such a partnership stating “such an entity would also need to approach the nonprofit board and discuss their intentions as well as the nature of the co-operation and the commitment that each partner is willing to take on.” This is especially significant because it highlights the importance of the educational leader being the bearer and primary communicator of the school vision and mission.
- 7) Several barriers were highlighted. Among those were poor communication, a tendency to hide one party’s faults rather than being transparent when mistakes are made, and being over-committed to one’s own goals so that parties from each organization fail to consider how decisions made and actions taken impact the

other party. The latter barriers tie back to good communication and honorable intentions.

### **Scientific or Scholarly Significance of the Study**

Given schools have goals and values which intersect with other community nonprofits and that shared efforts can maximize resource use and add value to both organizations, partnerships between the two make sense. Mcmillian, Wolf, and Cutting (2015) address the importance of “innovative collaborations” among nonprofits, and the importance of those collaborations to the local economies of rural areas. Furthermore, they posit that success in these collaborations are often due to the creativity of the leaders in the nonprofits in finding effective methods to deliver their missions.

This study’s focused theme of factors that need to be addressed to foster partnerships among nonprofit organizations and the tremendous positive potential, in building community and economy, especially in rural areas blends well with NELP standards that relate to culturally responsive and equitable leadership in their communities. The themes that were generated through the interview responses are a springboard for the development of open and meaningful dialogues between school leaders and leaders of nonprofits to find common causes and investigate the positive aspects of partnerships that enhance communities. Moreover, these themes are cause for some introspection for candidates in educational leadership preparation programs as the themes provide a very different lens through which one can gauge student outcomes.

The implications of this research are especially important in rural areas. According to Brockmann and Lacho (2015), rural areas and small communities tend to have an attitude of self-reliance. Such an attitude is especially powerful if school leaders have the ability to coalesce other non-profit leaders in partnerships that benefit the local community. In a purely resource management vein, Ohe (2017) discusses the benefits of non-profit organizations acting in networks to reduce marginal costs of goods and services. One might wonder, with this concept, what school leaders, in concert with other local community leaders, might do with fuel and energy costs, employee health costs, etc. if partnering with local governments, local health care facilities, churches and libraries.



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