RESEARCH FOR *ACTION*

Faith-Based Partnerships from the Perspective of the Schools:
An exploratory study of partnership benefits and challenges in Philadelphia Distict Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Philadelphia's schools have been actively encouraged to create partnerships with faith-based organizations since the late 1990's. In 2004, CEO Paul Vallas renewed the call for School District of Philadelphia (SDP) schools to be adopted by local faith-based organizations. Vallas believed that faith-based institutions were one of the most stable fixtures in communities and could therefore serve as valuable resources for schools. The School Reform Commission endorsed the goal of faith-based partnerships through its 2006 Declaration of Education which stated that every school must have active community partnerships by 2008. The District's Office of Family, Community and Faith-Based Initiatives (FCF Office) has endeavored to meet these mandates by supporting schools in establishing faith-based partnerships.

In the spring of 2008, the FCF Office asked Research for Action (RFA) to conduct an exploratory study of partnerships between faith-based organizations and schools. The goal of the study was to understand principals' perspectives on the benefits and value of faith partnerships with schools. RFA conducted in-depth interviews with 10 principals and more limited, supplementary interviews with another 13 principals. In addition, a survey was emailed to all principals in the SDP and 153 principals responded to the survey for a 54% response rate. Based on these data, RFA answered four primary research questions of the study. The following summary presents these research questions and RFA's findings in response to these research questions.

What types of supports and benefits do schools report receiving from their faith-based partners? How widespread and how frequently do schools report receiving these supports?

About 44% of our sample of schools reported having a faith partner. Another 10% were in the process of creating a partnership. Additionally, 17% had a partnership the previous year but it was dormant during the period of the research and 29% had never had a partnership and were not developing one. Schools that displayed openness to faith-based organizations were more likely to have one or more partnerships. In addition, previously existing ties such as personal relationships between school staff and the congregation often facilitated the creation of the partnerships.

Faith-based partnerships are providing a wide-range of services to schools in the District. Services include those that serve the entire school, such as allowing the use of a congregation's facilities or providing monetary donations. Services also include those that serve subgroups of students such

as mentoring or tutoring programs, services that serve families and those that are centered in the community. Partnerships are designed to be responsive to the needs of the school and thus services could change or evolve over time. Elementary schools were more likely to receive one to one student-oriented services whereas high schools were more likely to receive services that benefited the whole school.

Among schools with active faith-based partnerships, the most commonly reported service was use of facilities (69% of schools), followed by monetary donations (59% of schools). In addition, 56% received mentoring services from their faith partner, 55% of partnerships conducted parental engagement activities, and 54% of faith partners provided tutoring services.

The faith partnerships in our sample varied in their complexity with some limited to providing one-time events (which Sanders[1] defines as a "simple partnership") and others providing multiple services (a criterion for Sanders definition of a "complex partnership.") Many of the active faith partnerships in Philadelphia tended to provide multiple services to schools. The median number of services provided was seven. Over half of the respondents (55%) said that their faith partner provided services at least once per week. Thus, active faith partnerships tended toward the complex end of the Sanders' partnership continuum.

The social capital of the faith partner and the community may also influence the complexity and level of activity in the partnership. Faith-based partners with greater financial resources and greater social capital (ie., social networks, higher education levels and more time to volunteer) had more resources available to give to schools. On the other hand, congregations that have strong neighborhood ties, even if lacking in financial resources, had the potential to be an equally valuable resource to the school through their relationships with children and families outside of school. For example, one school called on the pastor of a local congregation to help resolve issues that arose with children from her neighborhood.

What do school-level staff point to as evidence that faith-based partnerships are having an impact on the school?

Principals with active partnerships appreciated the many services their faith partner brought to the school and believed that the partnership led to positive outcomes for the school and for students. In particular, most principals felt that the faith partner had strengthened the connection to their surrounding community, an outcome which has the potential to increase parent involvement and creates opportunities to make students' learning experiences more relevant to their lives outside of school. Principals also reported being more connected to resources in the community as a result of the faith partner. Some principals believed the faith partner had improved school climate. Principals also observed a positive impact from the individual attention faith partner volunteers provided to students through mentoring and tutoring programs. Some principals particularly appreciated having positive male role models from the faith partner working with their students. While having adequate numbers of well-trained, consistent volunteers was a concern among a few principals, particularly high school principals, they believed these programs helped improve students' motivation, self-esteem, goal setting, and anger management/conflict resolution skills. Elementary and middle school principals were more likely to make these statements than high school principals.

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[1]Sanders, M. G. (2006). Building School-Community Partnerships: Collaboration for Student Success. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Most principals relied on anecdotal evidence and observations when making these assessments. Future evaluation efforts could assess these outcomes by focusing solely on students receiving consistent services from a faith partner. Existing District data, including the District-wide teacher and student survey, could also be used to assess whether schools with active faith partnerships experience a greater sense of safety, motivation, and overall productive climate as well as higher levels of parental engagement.

How are the faith-based partnerships structured at the school level? What is required at the school and district level to sustain these partnerships?

Principals with active partnerships found it useful to have a staff liaison, in addition to the principal, to keep the partnership on track. Principals with active partnerships also reported that it was helpful to gain "buy-in" from the entire staff before launching the partnership.

Principals with active partnerships were confident that their partnerships would be sustained for the next several years. They reported having open communication with their partner, clearly defined roles, and a shared vision—all factors that research identifies as important in sustaining community school partnerships.[2]

Many principals were unaware of the supports provided by the District's FCF Office and expressed a desire for more support in identifying faith-based partners. However, they also provided suggestions for ways that the FCF Office could redeploy its staff to make the most effective use of limited resources. For example, principals suggested the FCF Office create a directory of potential faith-based partners, host a series of regional "meet & greet" gatherings where congregations (or other faith-based organizations) and schools come together to meet potential partners and develop a best practices manual.

What are the challenges of these partnerships?

The most commonly reported challenges to faith-based partnerships were: lack of staffing dedicated to the partnership; lack of time for staff to support the partnership; lack of time in the school day for students to receive partnership services; and lack of sufficient funding to support the partnership. It is important to note that no concerns about maintaining appropriate boundaries regarding faith-sharing were raised.

Principals without active partnerships were more likely to describe time, staffing, and funding as challenges or barriers to partnerships than were principals with active partnerships. Principals with active partnerships were, by and large, pleased with the direction of the partnership, reported few challenges, and were confident the partnership would be sustained for some years to come.

In conclusion, faith partnerships, as one type of community partnership, are a valuable resource to schools. Schools benefit in many ways from building ties with community institutions and it is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute to the development and sustainability of strong school faith-based partnerships.

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[2]Sanders, M. (2006).

Authors and Acknowledgements

Mission Statement

Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

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