

Strong School–Community Partnerships in Inclusive Schools Are “Part of the Fabric of the School....We Count on Them”

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Abstract

School–community partnerships play an essential role in successful schools, often providing supports and resources to meet staff, family, and student needs that go beyond what is typically available through school. Reciprocally, community partners benefit from their relationships with schools, including learning about schools’ inclusive culture. To better understand strong community partnerships and what fosters their development, we conducted focus groups with community partners of five schools. The first main finding presented in this article is that these schools have a variety of partners and partnerships, but all partnerships are reciprocal in that they are mutually beneficial. The second set of findings presented include the school factors that were facilitators of successful school–community partnerships: strong school leadership, an inviting school culture, educator commitment to student success, and the ability to collaborate and communicate with community partners. The community partners in many of these schools emphasized how the culture of including all students and providing all students with an excellent education profoundly influenced how they perceived disability and how they used their new knowledge in other settings. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Key Words: inclusion, school–community partnerships, inclusive culture, disability, collaboration, communication, external organizations

Introduction

Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012) described school–community partnerships as meaningful relationships with community members, organizations, and businesses that are committed to working cooperatively with a shared responsibility to advance the development of students’ intellectual, social, and emotional well-being. School–community partnerships can impact student success and post-school outcomes as well as positively influence and benefit the community in return. Auerbach (2010) characterized authentic partnerships as “respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing as part of a socially just, democratic school” (p. 729). The development of authentic, trusting relationships is germane to establishing effective school–community partnerships.

Community involvement in schools is a critical component for student achievement (Anderson, Houser, & Howland, 2010; Bryk, 2010; Coleman, 1988; McAlister, 2013; Sanders, 2006). Research shows schools that develop strong community partnerships have (a) a higher percentage of students performing on grade level (Sheldon, 2003), (b) increased parental volunteerism (Anderson et al., 2010), (c) supported school reform efforts (McAllister, 2013), (d) increased student test scores (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Sheldon, 2007), (e) increased student attendance rates (Sheldon, 2003, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), and (f) connections for students to learning opportunities outside of school (Blank et al., 2003). Because of their strong influence on students, families, and schools, trusting community partnerships are an integral feature of the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT).

SWIFT is an evidence-based theoretical framework for a fully braided, inclusive educational delivery system that extends beyond the school to include families and community, as well as state and district policies and practices (McCart, Sailor, Bezdek, & Satter, 2014; Sailor & Roger, 2005; Sailor et al., 2006). We define “evidence-based” as practices drawn from research studies that have been replicated numerous times with defined, measurable outcomes indicating effectiveness. Inclusive schools educate all students in learning environments that practice equity-based inclusion of all children, where every student is valued as a member of his or her neighborhood school and is provided the supports needed to achieve social and academic success. The SWIFT framework integrates five evidence-based domains as the foundation of effective inclusive school transformation (see Figure 1):

- (a) administrative leadership (e.g., Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Burrello, Hoffman, & Murray, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010),

- (b) multi-tiered system of support (e.g., Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Lane, Oakes, & Menzies, 2010; Sugai, Simonsen, Bradshaw, Horner, & Lewis, 2014),
- (c) integrated educational framework (e.g., Hang & Rabren, 2009; O’Day, 2002; Wenger, 2000),
- (d) family and community engagement (e.g., Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008; Bryk, 2010; Lawson & Sailor, 2000), and
- (e) inclusive policy structure and practice (e.g., Burrello, Sailor, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2013; Kozleski & Smith, 2009).

While the SWIFT framework is appropriate for any school (O’Rourke, 2014; Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013), it is especially beneficial for transforming schools that struggle with low achievement, high rates of problem behavior, and segregated delivery of specialized services. As such, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) established the National Center on Schoolwide Inclusive Reform, referred to as SWIFT Center, to provide intensive technical assistance to K–8 urban, rural, and high need schools, along with their districts and state education agencies, to improve outcomes for students with disabilities while transforming schools to positively impact all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

SWIFT Center defines the domain of family and community engagement as “strong, ongoing, collaborative working partnerships...that are developed with consideration of the unique culture of the community [and] allow for stakeholder input in the design, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of the system” (SWIFT Center, 2013, p. 3). We define the feature of trusting community–school partnerships as partnerships contributing to positive student outcomes and occurring when schools work collaboratively with community members, agencies, organizations, businesses, and industry around common goals, resulting in (a) direct participation by community representatives in school leadership, and (b) enhanced community resources. In other words, partnerships between schools and community members benefit students, families, schools, communities, or any combination of these parties (Sanders, 2006). Understanding what kinds of school–community partnerships are typically a part of successful schools and how schools foster and develop those partnerships is important to the research of SWIFT Center as we seek to support schools in developing their own school–community partnerships. This knowledge and understanding is also critical to the education field, as many states are undergoing budgetary constraints; both schools and communities may benefit from the resource sharing incurred from such partnerships.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

To inform SWIFT Center’s development of its technical assistance process, we conducted a broad knowledge development study across six schools nominated due to their implementation of one or more of the domains in the SWIFT framework (see Figure 1). The broad knowledge development study examined influencing factors in these schools as related to the SWIFT evidence-based domains. Here we report on the analysis of the community partnership data from the larger study. Specifically, we sought to explore the following questions:

- (a) What kinds of community partnerships do successful schools develop?
- (b) What factors support the development of strong community partnerships in these schools?

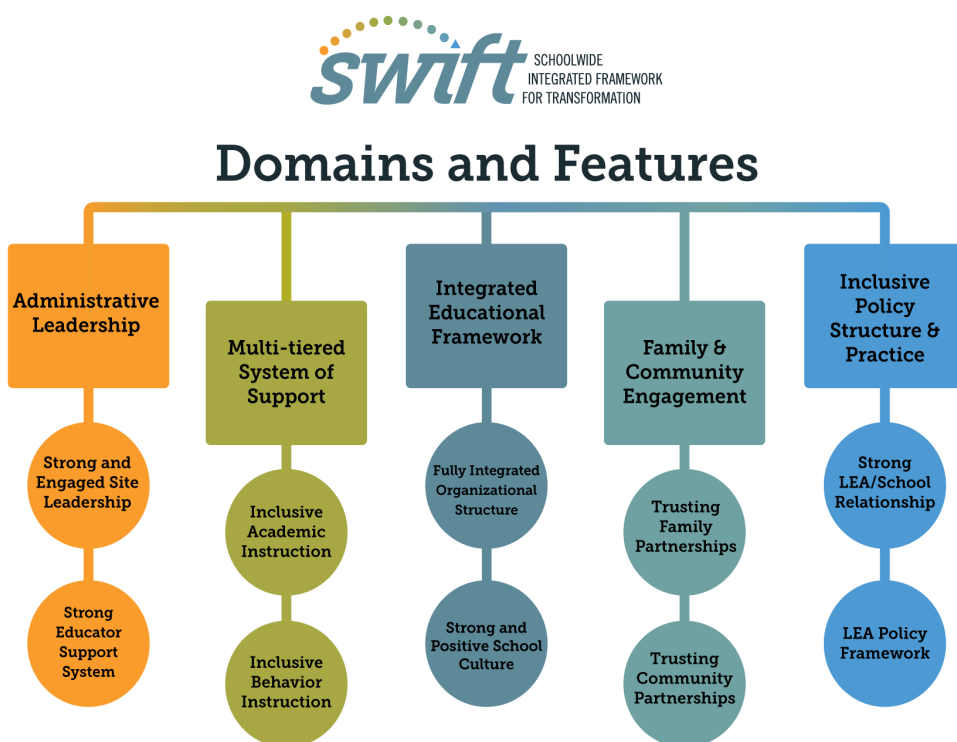


Figure 1. Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Domains and Features

Methods

This knowledge development study was conducted as part of SWIFT's appreciative inquiry into inclusive schoolwide transformation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based approach to systemic and organizational change that seeks to understand and value the best of what exists, imagine what could be possible, collaboratively plan for what we desire to be, and implement what will be. By developing a greater understanding of the successes and challenges faced in the schools nominated for this research, the goal was that the knowledge gained would inform the implementation efforts among SWIFT partner states, districts, and schools undergoing systemic transformation into fully inclusive schools (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015) and other schools seeking positive change.

There were five lines of inquiry guiding the appreciative inquiry: classroom practices, teacher and administrator perspectives, student perspectives, family and community partner perspectives, and supports for students with the most significant needs. The present article provides the findings of an analysis of the community partner focus groups. We report the methods of participant selection, including (a) the selection of the schools identified as Knowledge Development Sites (for the remainder of the article referred to as KDS), (b) the demographics of the KDS, (c) the recruitment of participants for the community partner focus groups, and (d) the demographics of focus group participants.

Participants

Selection of KDS

Six inclusive elementary and middle schools were selected as KDS through a systematic nomination and screening process that included surveys, interviews, and site visits. The study design included three selection criteria: representation of at least three different states, at least one urban and one rural school, and both elementary and middle schools. These criteria were used to ensure diversity in geography (state), school community (rural vs. urban), and school level (elementary vs. middle) in the final KDS selection since SWIFT is a national, K–8 technical assistance center and is charged with serving schools within each of these demographics. This diversity helped to provide models of excellence within different communities from which SWIFT partner schools undergoing systemic transformation could learn.

With these criteria in mind, SWIFT Center's national leadership consortium, composed of researchers and leaders in the field of inclusion with information to share and an interest in exploring the questions along with us, nominated 37 schools for their perceived excellence in implementing one or

more domains in the SWIFT framework (see Figure 1) and in student achievement (Shogren et al., 2015). After screening the nominated schools based on these criteria as well as gauging school interest in study participation, the pool was reduced to 11 schools. Teams of three to five researchers and technical assistance providers vetted these 11 schools. Vetting involved one-day site visits to collect more information about inclusive practices. Vetting results and diversity criteria narrowed the selection to the six KDS. The teams visited these sites two more times (each lasting three to four days) and collected various forms of data (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observations, checklists), including the focus group data reported here, from numerous stakeholders (i.e., students, families, school staff, community partners).

In this article, we report findings from the analyses of the data from the community partnership focus groups held at five of the six KDS. We did not hold a community partnership focus group at the sixth KDS (an elementary school) due to logistics beyond our control.

Demographics of KDS

The KDS included five elementary schools and one middle school in urban and rural communities representing four major U.S. geographic regions (Northeast, South, West, Midwest). Across the six sites, disability prevalence ranged from 11% to 27% of students; 12% to 54% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged; and 2% to 15% were English learners. The schools varied widely with respect to race/ethnicity with 27% to 64% of students categorized as White, 18% to 24% Black, 11% to 24% Hispanic, 0.4% to 10% Asian, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaska Native, and 6% to 11% reporting two or more races/ethnicities.

Participant Recruitment

We communicated the criteria for recruiting participants for the focus groups through both phone and email conversations with school contacts as well as through mailing and emailing a packet of information explaining the participant recruitment process. Because we wanted to understand who the schools considered to be their partners in the community and did not want to confine their concept of partnership, we described the requested focus group participants broadly, asking schools to identify six to nine members from the community who partnered with their school. We described “partners” as

...individuals [who] partner with your school to provide support, resources, and information to staff, students, and families. They may include volunteers, local businesses, community agencies, community leaders, professionals, and/or university or high school students. These may also include individuals from the community who partner with

your school outside of the school setting (e.g., family homes, in the community). They could also be community members who formerly or currently partner with your school.... In order to best represent the individuals from the community who partner with your school, we are looking for participants with a range of characteristics.

Using these guidelines, school contacts recruited, organized, and scheduled the focus groups.

Participant Demographics

Participants ($n = 40$) included both men (32.5%) and women (67.5%). These community partners represented community businesses, state and city agencies and departments, cultural organizations, colleges/universities, and charitable organizations including faith-based organizations. We describe these partners and their relationships with the schools in more detail in the findings.

Data Collection

Considering the exploratory nature of our research and since the development of community–school partnerships is strongly influenced by contextual factors (e.g., state or district policy, rural or urban nature of the community), we chose to conduct a qualitative study. Focus groups were selected as the best method (as opposed to individual interviews) for gathering rich information from those who experienced school–community partnerships firsthand, allowing us to form of a picture of the community partnerships at each KDS (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). The Institutional Review Board of the University of Kansas approved all aspects of the broad knowledge development study.

Questioning Route

Soliciting rich information to answer research questions is best done by constructing a written questioning route or a series of questions that cause conversation, flow naturally in sequence, maximize time, and progress from general to more specific questions as participants share their experiences (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). Our questioning route consisted of complete, conversational sentences. We based the questioning route topics on a review of the literature as well as specific areas in which the knowledge from the KDS could potentially inform SWIFT technical assistance and the education field in general. Experts in focus group methodology and topic content provided feedback on a draft of the questioning route which we then revised. Our “grand tour” topics (i.e., the broad topics of interest; Shank, 2006) were Communication and Relationships (e.g., “Tell me about your communication and relationship with the school, families, and other community organizations that partner with the school”), Partnership Activities (e.g., “In what ways to do you partner with the

school?”), and Benefits/Challenges (e.g., “What are the benefits of partnering with this school?”). Each general topic had several possible probes to use when appropriate to draw out more detail from participants.

Focus Groups

We conducted five community partnership focus groups. As noted in the “Selection of the KDS,” we were unable to hold a focus group at one elementary school. Each focus group session lasted between 90–120 minutes. Two SWIFT researchers moderated each focus group. The researchers had terminal degrees or were seeking terminal degrees in special education and had training and experience in the conduct of research. One acted as the primary facilitator and used an interview protocol to guide the focus group. The other researcher took field notes, monitored the time, and managed audiorecording, consent forms, and name tags.

The schools scheduled the sessions, which took place during the school day on the school campus. The smallest focus group had three participants, and the largest group had 12 participants. Each session started with an overview of the purpose of the KDS research and SWIFT Center and an explanation of the informed consent process. All participants signed forms consenting to be audiorecorded for later transcription of all focus group conversations.

Data Analysis

We used constant comparative analysis methods to develop a codebook and code the data. Below we describe the qualitative analysis in four stages: (a) open coding, (b) conceptual categorization, (c) axial coding in Dedoose, and (d) theme development.

Two researchers participated in open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) four of the five focus group transcripts, coding line-by-line and using constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers independently coded the same two community transcripts, each developing their own codes. They met after coding each transcript to review coding, discuss, and develop appropriate definitions for each code. They also then each coded additional transcripts separately and met to discuss new codes that emerged and how the developing codebook applied.

During the process of open coding, as we compared the coded data of each new document with the developing codebook and key quotes identified from previous transcripts, solid conceptual categories began to emerge. We often used participant quotes as initial codes in order to capture the essence of the quote. The constant comparative analysis process facilitated close examination of categorizations of the data, helping us to identify errors in our categorizations and collapse categories where appropriate (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To

condense, clarify, and exemplify the categories in the codebook, the researchers engaged in an exchange of analysis and codebook revisions (e.g., adding and revising definitions, adding exemplifying quotes) until we developed a stable codebook.

In axial coding, the developed codebook with its categories and subcategories are tested against the data, resulting in further development and refinement of the codebook (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Through this process, relationships between categories and subcategories are further described, and their relationships to others emerge. In this stage, we used an online, qualitative analysis application, Dedoose (2013), and recoded the four transcripts used to develop the initial codes as well as the remaining transcript using the developed codebook codes and definitions. In doing so, we confirmed the conceptual categories and gathered additional data for each code (Charmaz, 2006).

Themes in qualitative research can be thought of as the conceptual linking of expressions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In developing the themes found in the focus group data, we collapsed the categories of coded data (expressions identified in the transcripts) into big bucket concepts, which represent the primary ideas as related to the development of successful school–community partnerships. Although respondents in the community partnership focus groups discussed many aspects of the KDS that were not related to the development of their partnerships (e.g., inclusion strategies used by teachers, benefits of inclusion, barriers to inclusion, student outcomes), we restrict the themes reported in the findings only to those related to the development of successful school–community partnerships in the KDS. Themes began to emerge during the development of the initial codebook and then were confirmed or revised based on analysis of the data as it was recoded in Dedoose.

Trustworthiness Measures

We worked to improve trustworthiness of the data in three ways. First, we used multiple researchers at every stage of the study from protocol development to data analysis (Merriam, 1998). Using multiple researchers improved trustworthiness by reducing the influence of the personal biases of individual researchers and providing opportunities for analysis and a convergence of interpretations from those who were involved in differing stages of the research (e.g., protocol development, data collection, data analysis). Our team's diverse experiences with these phases of the research enabled us to deeply examine the data to ensure that our analysis captured all the themes that emerged. Second, SWIFT staff interviewed community partners from various organizations with different roles and responsibilities within the school (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005), allowing for triangulation of the data. Finally, all transcripts were

transcribed verbatim, providing thick and detailed descriptions and quotations (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). These three strategies for validation improved the credibility of the findings.

Findings

The data revealed a diversity of community partners and partnerships, and participant sentiments across focus groups converged to underscore several key factors supporting the development of successful school–community partnerships. First, we illustrate the range of school–community partnerships represented in our focus groups. Second, we describe the factors that supported the formation of strong partnerships in these successful schools.

Diverse and Reciprocal School–Community Partnerships

The data revealed the diverse and reciprocal nature of successful school–community partnerships. Schools benefitted from the increased resources, supports, and relationships resulting from the development of trusting school–community partnerships. One school staff member articulated their value, saying that community partnerships are “part of the fabric of the school... We embrace them as our family, and they’re one of us, and they’re not going anywhere. We count on them.” While the school and its constituents (e.g., students, families, teachers, staff) benefitted from all partners’ contributions to the school, each community partner also benefitted from its interactions. These included benefits to their business or program, personal satisfaction, enhanced knowledge of best practices, and personal growth. For example, one participant stated, “this [the school] is where I come to...refocus and recharge.”

The community partners in many of the schools emphasized how the culture of including all students and providing all students an excellent education profoundly influenced how they perceived disability and how they used their new knowledge in other settings. In particular, several participants referenced the instructional principles of universal design for learning, which provides students with opportunities for multiple forms of representation, expression, and engagement in an activity. One participant summarized how he internalized the strengths-based inclusive culture of his school partner regarding students with disabilities:

It’s really easy to walk past a student in a wheelchair with cerebral palsy and immediately think, “well there’s no way that student’s ever going to learn,” and it’s just not true. Every student can learn something and can make progress forward; and you know in today’s world, where we have all these standards and...you have to meet this year’s progress. Well what

is a standard year's progress really? It's going to be different for every kid, but it's truly discriminatory to say, just, "we're just gonna set you aside and not try and push you to the limits."

Another community partner concurred: "He's [a student with a disability] a human being, and we've got to treat that same kid the same as the other kids, no difference."

Another community partner described a "trickle effect" from her experience with the school, "we just know [inclusion through universal design] is beneficial for everyone." Learning about the inclusive culture in their schools was a major benefit for the community partners. A community partner, regarding inclusion, stated that because of her work with her school partner, she "can say with certainty, we can do that, and we even know how to do it... there's a gold standard." The various types of community partnerships, their relationships with the schools, and other mutual benefits gained are discussed below.

University

We defined university partnerships as partnerships formed with a local college or university offering teacher education. Representatives of the university partnerships served as "field advisors" and "supervisors" for student teachers, directors of "elementary and secondary education program[s]," "coordinators" of credential and master's degree programs, and instructors of targeted education programs in the schools (e.g., "Family Nutrition Education").

University partnerships provided schools with student teachers, professional development and continuing education (e.g., master's degree programs) for in-service teachers, instructional support and training, and other support for students with disabilities. Schools benefitted from the support of student teachers, the universities' recognition of their teachers' innovative practices, and the ongoing training and support provided to them.

In turn, universities benefitted from having placements and space for on-site seminars for their student teachers. University partners expressed gratitude that they could trust the schools' practice, as explained by one participant:

We have several teachers here [at the school] who are graduates of our program in special ed. [They've] hired a number of graduates. It's always fun to see that full circle...come through our program. They really learned what inclusion should look like, and then they move here where it's really happening more than at any other school in the district, so that's part of why we always want to have our students here each semester.

University partners also expressed gratitude about being able to rely on schools for high-quality and organized placements for their student teachers. One university partner said:

I visit probably 20 to 25 schools in my observations, but [this school] is the only one that calls the interns in prior to their starting their service and runs a workshop for them. Any intern that I've had at [school] knows exactly where to sign in, how much it costs to eat, and what they're expected to do aside from my assignments for them.

Social Service

Social service partnerships included healthcare, child advocacy, community mental health, developmental disability resources, and juvenile detention agencies. These agencies partnered with schools in order to provide their services at the school. These partnerships benefitted the schools because they helped keep students in school and out of trouble, provided free or reduced cost health services (e.g., medical, dental, vision), and referred students and families for disability or needs-based services. They also benefitted the school by ensuring collaboration between the school and other agencies that provide educational services in other environments (e.g., detention centers). These partnerships benefitted the social service agencies because the schools provided convenient access for their clientele. One participant stated, "Without our school allowing us...to come in, a lot of these kids wouldn't get the help they need....The school played an integral part in us being able to link these families to everything that they need."

Business

Business partnerships were developed with a wide range of local and national for-profit businesses. For example, one school identified Reebok as a community partner because they donated the Build Our Kids Success (BOKS) before-school physical fitness program. The BOKS program benefited from having a school willing to run their program, and the school benefitted from implementing the program. Another business partner, the leader of a local pest control company who wanted to be more than just a sign on a baseball field, created a program to encourage students to read, but the school was able to define how it was implemented. Through that program, the local business donated money to the school to use for book purchases to enhance individual classroom libraries. The business partner benefitted from the satisfaction she felt in making a real contribution to the school and being able to advertise for her small local company. In turn, the school benefitted from the donation of books.

Another type of business partnership developed was with educational technology companies located in two schools' communities. The company pilot tested their products, which were geared towards students with disabilities in the inclusive schools, and conducted focus groups with the teachers to learn how to improve their products. Teachers were given access to the technology

and learned how to use it and monitor their students' success with it. A community partner stated:

They can call me up any time, and I'll come out here to train them or work with them on the software. [They are] great partners in giving us ideas as to how to improve our software. It never ends. But we're just happy to be a partner, and I'm happy to have some place close to home that I can go and see that I'm still having an effect every day, and from what's going on in the classroom, to try to get better at what we do...our software primarily serves those with learning disabilities and fits truly into a universal design for learning model, which is an on-ramp for everybody in education—fits right into an inclusive model, so it's a great tool.

Another community partner stated that partner schools have

given [them] multiple ideas that have gone to engineering and gone to development because of their feedback when they're using the product with these kids [with disabilities]....So it's, it's reciprocal. It's not just us giving to them; it's them giving to us as well.

Nonprofit Organizations

Partnerships with nonprofit organizations included organizations with a cultural mission (e.g., museum, arts council) or service mission (e.g., feeding the hungry, providing clothing to those in need). For example, a museum in a large city partnered with a school to provide professional development, classroom curriculum, museum tours, and coaching on visual thinking strategies for the students at the school. The school benefitted from the partnership in numerous ways, including student enrichment activities and professional development for teachers. The benefit to the museum, as one community partner stated, included a greater understanding of how to support students with special needs in the museum setting:

We're seeing more and more...autism in our school tours...we need to do more training of our volunteers, too, to understand what we are now dealing with in the school setting...so it's been a great two-way learning street here between [school] and the [museum].

The benefits of this partnership extended beyond the local community to the state. The museum, using what they learned about the benefits of universal design for learning from the teachers at their partnering school, "made a partnership with the State Arts Council to promote the use of universal design principles throughout the state."

Service-oriented community partners helped students and families from the school (e.g., "adopting" families at Christmas, providing food baskets or clothing for families in need). One community partner said:

Typically about once a month, I'll just come in and ask [the principal] what's your greatest need, and then whatever [is needed], I try and fill that need...just to have a relationship with the school and just to help out....We just want to be a community church. We don't want to be a church that's just for ourselves, so we want to be known as "we're here for the community."

Another mission of some service-oriented community partners was to encourage all students to do community service. The community partners benefitted from the schools because often the children for whom they implemented their programs participated in the community service projects, and the schools benefitted because their students learned about contributing to their community through the projects. For example, one community partner coordinated a local charity that provided backpacks full of food sent home from school to families in need every Friday. The charity raised money by selling bowls made by the school children filled with soup at a fundraising luncheon:

[The] children made a number of...bowls that were given out to all the business people, commissioners, senators; whoever was there [at the fundraiser] got some bowls, so [the principal] connects that way with the community, with the children....They were not only doing a fun thing, they were helping other people. You have to implement that early on... that just shows them that they're part of the community.

Local Municipality

Local municipality partnerships were with local governmental officials and employees engaged in positions of civic service (e.g., fireman, policeman, city commissioner). Since the schools and the local municipalities served the same populations, their partnership was very natural. The benefits of this type of partnership to the schools included programs to implement in school (e.g., fire safety), activities, and infrastructure (e.g., adding a sidewalk near the school). For example, one city commissioner said, "we bend over backwards for our schools. Our schools are our number one priority....We just all pull together. What our schools need, we try our best to provide it for them."

Local municipalities also benefitted from partnering with the schools. One example of this benefit was group problem solving. In a small city, the Parks and Recreation afterschool sports program enrollment declined sharply. Through conversation with the principals of local schools, the Parks and Recreation staff figured out that the economy was the culprit, because parents could not transport their children due to needing to work. In addition, the principal wanted her students to receive homework help after school. Here, the Parks and Recreation Commissioner explains the solution arrived at by the group:

We worked through the schools to get a designated bus stop at the Rec Center from the [schools] and...we were able to get the kids through the Rec Center, give them their snack, knock their homework out [with volunteer and paid tutors], and then get them into our athletic program to be able to boost our numbers back up....We have a scholarship program that the commission awarded us...and we base that on the school lunch....We're working now with the school board through the middle school and the high school to tack on to the activity bus so kids that are in our athletic programs can catch the activity bus to be able to get home.

School Factors That Promote the Development of Strong Community Partnerships

Community partners of all types identified school factors that they felt contributed to the success of their school–community partnerships. The four school factors that appeared to contribute most to the promotion of strong community partnerships were (a) strong school leadership, (b) inviting school culture, (c) teacher commitment to student success, and (d) collaboration and communication among partners.

Strong School Leadership

Strong school leadership played a pivotal role in the formation of community partnerships. Community partners described the need for the principal to be vision-oriented with respect to the school and the community's role in supporting trusting partnerships. “[The principal] sees a vision not just as inclusion with kids with disabilities in the classroom but inclusion of the community and the school.” While a vision was important, “the capacity of the principal to motivate his or her staff and to engage the community” was also viewed as “essential to the success of this or probably any school.” Partners perceived the principal's “buy-in” of the community partnerships and their actions as being important to “get[ting] the community involved.”

Additionally, strong school leaders were also described as going above and beyond to access and sustain school–community partnerships, to the point of eliciting a board member reaction of “Oh my God, what's [the principal] done this month? [He's/She's] exhausted!” due to the extensive outreach “in terms of community involvement,” such as attending university partner's events, chamber of commerce meetings, and PTO meetings, “actively creating relationships in the community.” One participant described their school partner's principal as having a “special talent for nurturing relationships with parents, with teachers, with community partners.”

Inviting School Culture

Focus group participants noted that having an inviting school culture was conducive to community partnership development. Community partners described their school partners as having an “open door policy,” meaning they felt welcome to contribute to the school on various levels. Community partners also felt that their school partners enabled them to initiate new ways of contributing to the school on projects of the community partner’s choice: “You can...participate in any way you want...it’s an open relationship, and it’s because of [the principal’s] attitude, I think.” The “open door policy” also extended to inviting the community to support and attend extracurricular school activities (e.g., theatre performances, carnivals):

It was almost like the whole community was involved. The city counselors came. You know, there were other people, not just the parents and the students. Everybody, it’s like an open door policy here, so they really go out and reach out to the community.

This inviting school culture was recognized as a reason that community partners really enjoyed visiting their partner schools. One participant noted how the school culture “infected the whole school. Everybody is really inviting.”

Teacher Commitment to Student Success

Community partners felt that teachers in the partner schools were committed to their students’ success and that their commitment made the partnerships, particularly those that crossed into the classrooms, that much more effective. Teachers’ willingness to go above and beyond what is typically expected of them encouraged community partners’ to support their work:

The commitment that I see just from the teachers alone, it’s not an 8:00 to 3:00 job; it goes well beyond that, where they’re willing to take those extra steps, and not, you know, “work-to-rule” as the saying goes, but take those extra steps to educate themselves so that they can educate the children even more.

This strong dedication motivated community partners to address barriers to student success. About the principal of one school, a community partner commended the principal’s hiring practice, saying that the principal believed that “every student can learn” and that the principal “doesn’t accept anything less than that from her teachers.” The principal expected the teachers “to push every student forward as far as you possibly can when you’re working with them.” Such dedication inspired the community partner to be willing to “supply [the school] with whatever support I can to help [the school] achieve that goal.”

Partners also felt that teachers took advantage of opportunities made available to them through the community partnerships, such as providing coaching for classroom teachers. Teachers “willing to be in that situation and have an outsider come in and work with them in this way” demonstrated “a genuine goal for, you know, striving for excellence.” One partner expressed that there appeared to be “a connection between the quality of teaching and...their commitment to teaching,” resulting in student success. The clear vision of success for all students, the invitation to support it, and teachers’ commitment to achieving it combined to motivate community members to partner with the school.

Collaboration and Communication

In addition to the factors previously discussed, participants described collaboration and communication as essential to fostering strong partnerships. Collaboration included working together on projects, “contribut[ing] your ideas,” and “bring[ing] something new to the table.” As one participant said, “the boundaries of your collaborating are only limited by you, so you take off those defenses literally and share and meet collaboratively.” Collaboration also included ensuring reciprocal benefits for community partners, as mentioned.

Of course, collaboration is only as good as the communication among the partners. Communication was described as “open” and occurring across partners: “the parents are involved, they’re communicated with, they receive communication from the school and the community.” Some schools sent out weekly or monthly communications to all partners (family and community). Communication also involved listening to each other and to families. Schools also included community partners anonymously in their annual online school climate surveys. All community partners valued communication and deemed it essential, particularly those partners who sought to address unmet family needs (e.g., clothing, food, shelter) and keep students in school and out of juvenile detention. Most simply said, the partnership “needs communication to work.”

Discussion

This article reports data gathered from focus groups with 40 community partners at five schools (four elementary and one middle school) identified as KDS by SWIFT. Community partnerships are an evidence-based feature in the SWIFT domain of Family and Community Engagement.

The focus group participants represented a range of community partners, and multiple themes about what factors they felt fostered strong partnerships were consistent across sites. The reciprocal nature of community partnerships permeated all focus group discussions. Across focus groups and types of partners, the mutual benefit for the school and its constituents as well as the

community partner was an important factor. This finding of reciprocity is consistent with the findings of Anderson and colleagues (2010). In their study of community service provider partners, the community partners perceived their partnership as “all about helping one another” (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 48). In a study of how schools develop successful school–community partnerships, Hands (2005) noted the importance of identifying those mutual benefits of partnering from the beginning and making sure to set up a “win-win situation” (p. 72) for the school and community partners.

Multiple types of school–community partners were represented at each KDS. These included the following types of partners: (a) university, (b) social services, (c) business, (d) nonprofit organization, and (e) local municipality. These types of partnerships we identified align with existing community research. Both Blank, Jacobson, and Melaville (2012) and Adger (2001), in their research on school–community partnerships, identified many more types of partnerships than were represented in our small sample. Blank and colleagues (2012) identified the same five as above and more, including neighborhood groups, teachers unions, and parks and recreation organizations. Although Adger’s findings were quite similar to ours, they did not include nonprofit organizations (e.g., those with service or cultural missions) among types of community partners.

School factors that contributed to strong community partnerships were strong school leadership, inviting school culture, teacher commitment to student success, and collaboration and communication among partners. The powerful influence of strong school leadership, in which the principal has a clear vision and a genuine desire to build and sustain collaborative, mutually beneficial relationships, is not surprising. Furco (2013), summarizing the literature on community engagement, highlighted the “importance of establishing democratic partnerships that are built on meaningful, mutually beneficial activities and that are developed through shared values, trust, and mutual respect” (p. 627). In the case of the five KDS included in this analysis, a clear vision of providing *all* students an excellent education was a driving force behind all decisions. This vision united school staff and community partners and benefited everyone involved.

One beneficial outcome of strong school leadership committed to a clear vision is an inviting school culture. Noted author and poet Maya Angelou once stated, “people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Territorialism is the most pervasive impediment to collaboration between schools and community partners (Sanders, 2001); this study found that community partners appreciated feeling like they were valued and welcome members of the school community.

As valued members of the community drawn to work towards a clear vision, community partners were motivated by educators' commitment to *all* students' success. Community partners trusted their efforts would be maximized and were aligned with the educators' efforts to teach *all* students, including those with the most extensive needs. Our study confirmed that teachers' commitment to *all* students' success fostered community partners' relational trust in teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and in the organizational conditions of the school (Kirby & DiPoala, 2011). This study strongly supports Kirby and DiPoala's (2011) finding that "there is a relationship between schools where faculty have a sense of optimism toward students' academics and how faculty perceive the way their school engages parents and community members" (p. 553).

An important finding of this study is that collaboration involves reciprocity: community partners and schools both benefit from the partnership. Sanders (2001) reported that developing two-way partnership activities was a challenge for schools but something they strived to accomplish. Of the numerous benefits of the partnerships to community partners and schools, an important finding of this study was that community partners learned about supporting successful inclusion of students with disabilities through their partnerships with the schools.

Although participants expressed satisfaction with their partnerships with these inclusive schools, they also noted that communication is key to successful collaboration (e.g., Epstein, 2011). Knowing that the school staff will communicate openly with community partners to convey their needs as well as understand how community partners can help them is paramount to partnership. Schools and partners communicated in multiple ways, as no one form of communication suits every relationship. Blank et al. (2012) posit that honest and constructive communication is critical in creating shared ownership of partnership activities.

Recommendations for School Leaders

Based on this and other research in the field, we have derived the following practices and strategies for school leaders on how to establish trusting community partnerships, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Recommendations for School Leaders

Recommended Practices	Strategies for Implementation
1. Engage with the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent businesses and service organizations and inquire about what they sell or the services they offer • Establish a relationship with the owner/proprietor of local businesses and service organizations • Attend social and cultural events within your community and network with other attendees • Identify a staff member to be the “community liaison” for the school and set aside time for that staff member to build and sustain community relationships
2. Jointly identify mutual interests and goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite local business and service representatives to a school event (e.g., evening social, luncheon cooked by the students) to discuss mutual interests and goals • Create a site council and invite community representatives to join and engage in school and community improvement efforts • Survey community partners about what they see as needs of the families and students in their community • Link mutual interests and goals to student learning
3. Ensure reciprocity in the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet regularly with community partners to identify and update mutual interests and goals for the partnership • Identify ways that the school can give back to the community (e.g., open building use, participation in service learning projects) • Identify ways to harness community resources and services to support families and children in the school setting
4. Maintain an “open door policy”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite families, school staff, and community members to provide meaningful feedback on school programs, policies, practices, and goals • Invite individual local business and service representatives to tour the school, observe classrooms, and participate in a classroom or schoolwide event • Schedule appointments with community representatives to discuss student, family, school, and community needs • Make school buildings available for community use
5. Invite community members to serve in various roles within the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite community members to serve on committees and leadership teams and contribute to governance decisions • Ask community members to evaluate the performance of the school and staff • Involve community members as active participants in projects, field trips, classroom lessons, and celebrations

Limitations

The findings from this qualitative study are valuable but have some limitations. First, we report data from only five of the six SWIFT KDS. Due to reasons beyond our control, we were unable to obtain data from the sixth school, which may have resulted in a different interpretation of the findings and key themes. Second, one of the KDS is a charter school, and many of its partnerships were heavily focused on the administration of the school. We did not report this as a theme because it did not align with our definition of school–community partnerships, though these relationships were certainly important to the administration of the charter school and its success. Third, one elementary school focus group included community partners who worked with the high school. We excluded these data (e.g., data on partnerships aiding transition to employment) from our analysis because, while informative and evident of partnership at the secondary level, it was not applicable to this study as the high school was not one of our knowledge development sites.

Recommendations for Further Research

This exploratory study unearthed interesting themes that should be investigated in more depth in future research. Most notably, participants discussed how much they have learned about inclusion through their partnerships with these schools. Future research should examine how community partnerships spread inclusive values in the community; to investigate examples of this spreading of values, researchers might query other schools, camps, recreational event groups, religious entities, sports teams, and businesses (the latter on hiring practices). Additionally, the findings on community partners' perceptions of teacher commitment to student success suggests a need for future research on the influence of teacher commitment on community stakeholders' interest in and willingness to partner.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that school–community partnerships can be a strong and needed support for local schools while also providing a reciprocal benefit to the community partners. Schools have a variety of partners and partnerships, ranging from local small businesses and nonprofits to large universities and corporations. Each community partner provided unique and individualized support to his or her local school, while also receiving social, emotional, and tangible benefits in return. In particular, a strong finding of reciprocal benefit was that community partners apply what they learn from a school's inclusive culture and practices to better support the inclusion of all

individuals with disabilities in their community outside of the school. School factors that facilitate these partnerships include strong school leadership, an inviting school culture, educator commitment to student success, and the ability to collaborate and communicate with community partners. Strong community partnerships support schools in the present, while the benefits to the community may continue long into the future.

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