
EVALUATION: HOW BEST TO SUPPORT ACTION TEAMS

Connecticut State Department of Education Middletown, Connecticut

Since 1995, the Connecticut School-Family-Community Partnerships Project (CT SFCP Project) has trained almost 100 school Action Teams for Partnerships to support student success. Last year, we conducted an evaluation of Project activities in order to determine what factors predict successful implementation of Action Teams, and how best to support successful implementation. This information will indicate where to focus limited resources in order to maximize the impact of our work.

The CT SFCP Project leadership team contracted a third-party evaluator. Finding funding was the biggest challenge we faced in implementing this activity. In order to overcome this obstacle, we chose to reduce our training schedule and divert training funds to project evaluation. The State Department of Education and partners in the CT SFCP Project also contributed staff time to this important activity.

The research targeted a stratified random sample of trained Action Teams. Methods for collecting data included phone surveys, site visits, and focus groups. Team contacts participated in the phone surveys, and five schools identified by the survey as having successful Action Teams hosted focus groups. At some of these schools, district leaders participated in the focus group discussions.

The Connecticut study found that successful teams had strong leadership and connected activities to school improvement efforts. In particular, teams had:

Decision-Making Authority–

Successful teams made or influenced important decisions. Most teams reported that family and community involvement were part of their school or district improvement plan.

Ability to Act–

Teams had to be able to “get things done.” Resources, staff, volunteers, and authority to move from ideas to action were all critical. A full-time staff person devoted to partnership work often provided leadership, ensured follow-up, and maintained momentum.

Team Cohesion–

Teams reported that trust among members, commitment, and flexibility in the division of labor were important success factors.

According to the Connecticut study, turnover among team members, particularly among principals, was the greatest threat to teams. Teams had to plan for turnover, ensuring that no one member served as a keystone. Disappointment and loss of motivation caused many teams to lose momentum. To avoid this, teams gave the following advice:

- Set clear and realistic goals to manage expectations and avoid disappointment over initially slow progress. Start small to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

- Remember reaching all parents is an ongoing challenge. Never give up.
- Focus on and celebrate early successes, no matter how small.

The study also concluded that team work was essential. Some suggestions for teambuilding included:

- Focus on strengths as well as needs.
- Start with a small, dedicated group, and build over time.
- Provide off-site opportunities for team members and others to contribute.
- Make it fun.

The results of this evaluation have been and continue to be used to direct planning for the CT SFCP Project. The Project leadership team analyzed and used extensively the final report at last year's Project Retreat, at which the team made the decision to increase outreach to Action Teams.

To facilitate this approach, team development has been broken down into six stages: readiness, formation, start-up, development, impact, and renewal. The Project leadership team developed an annual survey to collect data from Action Teams to determine their stage of development and current strengths and concerns. This survey was distributed to all identified active Connecticut Action Teams for Partnerships this year for the first time. Annual Project retreats will include attention to survey responses. In addition, the Project membership database includes tables to capture data from the responses.

New Action Teams will receive more outreach calls and contacts from Project staff

at strategic times linked to probable issues of interest. Site visits are scheduled one month after completion of team training. An outreach call to discuss implementation successes and obstacles is made one month after this site visit. Another outreach call to talk about end-of-year celebrations, evaluation, and planning for the upcoming year will be placed in April each year.

Upon completion of the initial year-long evaluation project, an article in our *Schools & Families* newsletter provided information about the most relevant results to teams and others in Connecticut doing partnership work (statewide readership: over 4,000). A special meeting for State Educational Leaders and Project stakeholders formally informed them of the evaluation report and findings in order to help plan action steps based on the results.

The CT SFCP Project has made evaluation an ongoing practice. At the Project Retreat, CT SFCP Project partners budgeted for ongoing evaluation work from an outside evaluator, and committed to doing the same every year, as long as possible. Our experience of the value of the feedback obtained makes ongoing evaluation a higher priority in our work. Students are the ultimate beneficiaries of improved, more focused professional development and technical assistance to school-based Action Teams for Partnerships.

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