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# THE PARTNERSHIP ECOSYSTEM: AN INTRODUCTION

***The Vision:** Authentic and vibrant partnerships between schools and youth- and family-serving organizations provide every young person the opportunity and support they need to be successful.*

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Given the continued challenge of meeting the needs of every student in King County, an increasing number of school and school district leaders are realizing that they cannot go it alone. The resource and time constraints of the traditional school day mean that it cannot be the only pathway to student success. We need a coordinated approach that puts students and families at the center and calls on community partners to complement and supplement traditional school offerings through expanded learning opportunities.

A rich body of research about expanded learning opportunities and their impact on students make it clear that high-quality out-of-school-time programs can help reduce the achievement gap and positively affect a wide range of outcomes. This is particularly true when schools and community partners work collaboratively to coordinate school-day activities with the activities offered in before- and after-school and summer programs.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, many educators are recognizing that a more comprehensive approach to supporting young people’s physical, social, and emotional needs can improve academic achievement.<sup>2</sup>

By building authentic partnerships between schools and out-of-school-time partners, we can create consistency across the environments in which kids spend most of their time. When multiple partners work together in productive ways, a vibrant **ecosystem** of supports can ensure that each young person’s needs are met holistically- throughout the day and throughout the year.

## WHAT IS A PARTNERSHIP ECOSYSTEM?

An ecosystem is defined as “A biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment;” more generally, an ecosystem is “a complex network or interconnected system.”<sup>3</sup>

We use the metaphor of an ecosystem to frame community-school partnerships because the environment in which partnerships operate is inherently complex, and partnerships function best when they are interconnected and dynamically attuned to student needs. The partnership ecosystem can make the most efficient use of available resources when all partners focus on what they do best and contribute to a holistic system of supports for students. In a thriving partnership ecosystem, schools and partners are

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<sup>1</sup> Partnership for Children and Youth, *Time Well Spent*, <http://partnerforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Time-Well-Spent-ExecSummary.pdf>

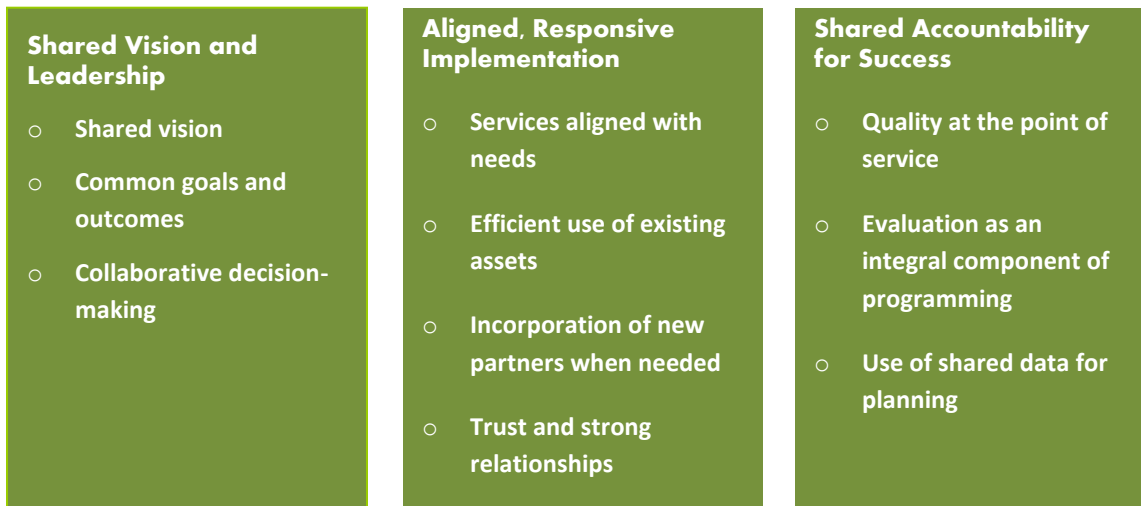
<sup>2</sup> Harvard Family Research Project, *Partnerships for Learning*, <http://www.hfrp.org/PartnershipsForLearning>

<sup>3</sup> “Ecosystem.” *Oxford Dictionaries*. n.d. [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/ecosystem](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/ecosystem)

committed to effective site coordination; shared leadership; aligned, responsive implementation; and shared accountability for success.

## HOW DOES THE PARTNERSHIP ECOSYSTEM WORK?

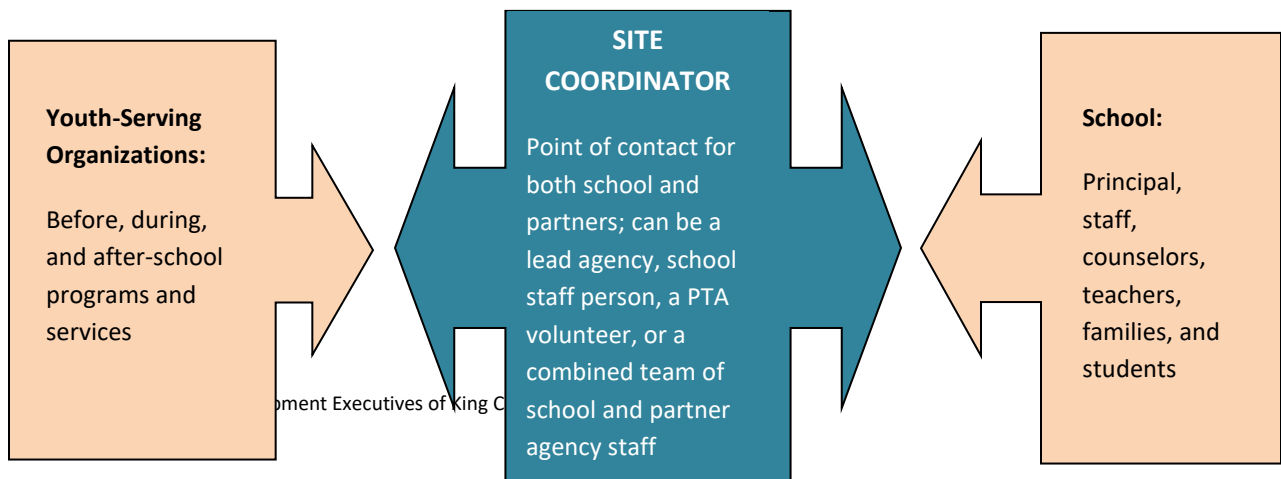
Just like all ecosystems, the partnership ecosystem is strongest when partners and schools work together to create optimal learning environments for students. For the most part, well-coordinated and cohesive services at the school level share certain characteristics, shown below:



There are many program models that have these components; examples include Community Schools, Full-Service Community Schools, and some 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Community Learning Centers. Regardless of the specific model, **coordination** (by one individual or by a team) is essential to ensure that the core components are implemented well.

### Site Coordination: The Glue of a Partnership Ecosystem

In order to lay the proper groundwork for a partnership ecosystem, the partnership must invest in site coordination. The site coordinator or coordination team serves as a central point of contact for community partners and others providing support services. Ideally, the site coordinator or coordination team works closely with the leadership of the school.



## COMPONENTS OF THE ECOSYSTEM: TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS

At a school site, you may encounter an ecosystem that includes an array of different types of partnerships. Partnership types can vary widely depending on the services, interests, and capacity of the partner organization and the school. The main partnership types are:<sup>4</sup>

- **Cooperative:** Partners operate autonomously from the school. Program goals are primarily established by the partner agency, though they may share one or more goals with the school.
- **Collaborative:** The partner shares goals with the school, and communicates about progress on a semi-regular basis. The school and the partner organization maintain ultimate decision-making authority over their own activities.
- **Integrated:** The partner plays a major role in site planning processes, and shares data, resources, and decision-making authority with the school.

## EXAMPLE OF A PARTNERSHIP ECOSYSTEM WITH MULTIPLE PARTNER TYPES

Below is an example of a partnership ecosystem at Cleveland High School in Seattle. The chart below shows some of the youth-serving organizations at the school and describes their major functions. Partnerships are managed by a Site Coordinator that is employed by a lead agency – in this case the YMCA. The Site Coordinator manages partners and works directly with school staff to align services.

Example: Partnership Ecosystem at Cleveland High School, Seattle Public Schools <sup>5</sup>		
CHARACTERISTICS		
Cooperative	Collaborative	Integrated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Markets and recruits for programs/activities at school</li> <li>• One-time or occasional resource sharing or field trip opportunities</li> <li>• Guest lecturing, presentations, panels or judging at school</li> </ul>	<p><i>Same as cooperative partner plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attends Community Partner meetings at Cleveland</li> <li>• Provides on-going opportunities at school</li> <li>• Staff members are regularly</li> </ul>	<p><i>Same as collaborative partner plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff members work at school on a full- or part-time basis</li> <li>• Facilitates collaboration between school and other partners</li> <li>• Works to build or change school</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the Oakland Unified School District , Community Partner Identification Tool. Retrieved from <http://www.ousd.org/Page/11101>

<sup>5</sup> Seattle Public Schools, Cleveland High School, *Partner Protocol Template*, K.Domingo

Example: Partnership Ecosystem at Cleveland High School, Seattle Public Schools <sup>5</sup>		
	present at school or school events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actively collaborates with school</li> <li>Collaborates with teachers.</li> </ul>	culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborates on identifying funding sources, grant writing and reporting.</li> </ul>
ORGANIZATIONS / PROGRAMS		
Cooperative	Collaborative	Integrated
<p><b>UW Astronomy Department/Alumni:</b> Invites students to participate in building tour, free dinner, and evening lecture.</p> <p><b>YouthForce, Boys &amp; Girls Clubs:</b> Recruits students for internships and employment.</p> <p><b>IGNITE:</b> Provides young women interested in science and technology with field opportunities with Microsoft.</p>	<p><b>OneWorld Now!:</b> Recruits students for program, holds afterschool classes on campus.</p> <p><b>Summer Search:</b> Recruits 10th graders for initial summer program followed by mentoring and college going support, volunteers at school wide events.</p> <p><b>Urban Impact:</b> Runs program during advisory and Homework Center afterschool.</p> <p><b>Y-Tech, YMCA:</b> Provides trainings for parents and community, afterschool program for students, in class technology support for teachers and professional development trainings.</p>	<p><b>College Success Foundation:</b> Achievers program and school wide college support.</p> <p><b>Public Health, Seattle and King County:</b> Operates on-site teen health clinics.</p> <p><b>YMCA:</b> Implements Full-Service Community Schools grant, oversees Cleveland TEA programs and coordinates community partners</p>

## GETTING STARTED WITH PARTNERSHIP

In practice, most school sites do not have the kind of thriving ecosystem described above. Many school and organizational leaders are hesitant about the idea of partnership, or they simply do not know where to begin. The following are three simple steps to help them get started:

1. **Assess your readiness to partner:** Partnerships require time and resources, so it is important that partners have given some thought to the potential benefits and challenges of partnership, and to their school or organization's capacity and willingness to invest.
2. **Identify which type of partnership to pursue:** Just as every child needs a broad range of experiences to thrive, every thriving partnership ecosystem needs a variety of different types of partners. *Cooperative* partners operate autonomously, but may share one or more goals with the school. *Collaborative* partners share school goals, and periodically discuss with school partners the ways they are helping to accomplish shared goals. *Integrated* partners work closely with school partners to accomplish shared goals, and participate in planning and decision-making at their school site.



3. **Learn about potential partner schools and communities:** Learning about students and their communities is a vital step in planning for partnership. By researching the community's needs, resources, strengths, history, and culture, school and organization leaders can better understand the context from which students come. Understanding the goals of the school can help partners assess whether a partnership will be a good fit. Documenting existing resources is important, as this will show what is already working, prevent overlap in services, and assist with identifying gaps.

Once partners have done these things, they are ready to begin the hard work of true partnership: forging a common vision, aligning services to needs, evaluating shared work, and sustaining relationships over time.