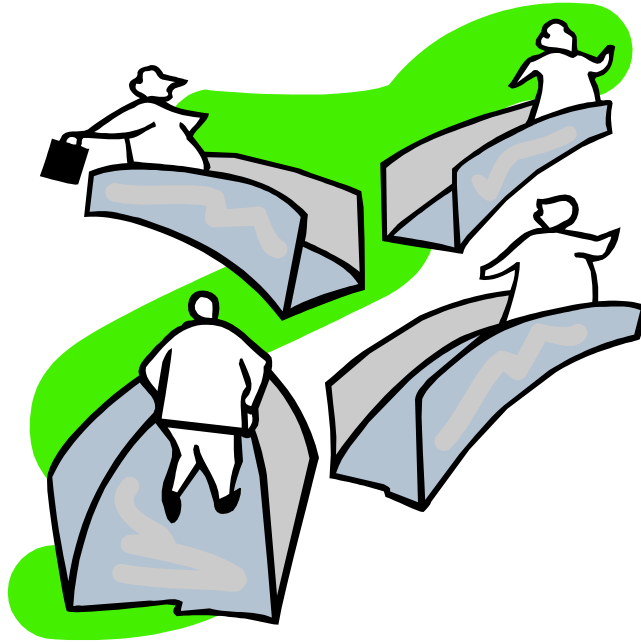# Building a Bridge (and getting over it)

Developing Effective Partnerships Between Schools & Youth Services

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Introduction

Schools and youth services both work with and for young people. Each are engaged in the delivery of services that respond to the needs and concerns of young people, that develop their skills and abilities and support them in increasing their access to a broad range of life opportunities.

Due to a range of contextual, philosophical and practical factors, however, schools and youth services work differently and sometimes respond to different aspects of a young person's life. At times, the priorities developed and approaches adopted by the two sectors appear to compete and to clash and a certain divide between players is forged.

In practical terms, such divides have kept some schools and some youth services from developing positive and effective partnerships through which the holistic needs of young people might be identified and addressed. Misunderstandings, suspicion, defensiveness and territoriality have kept some collaborations from succeeding as have a range of structural and systemic barriers.

As Szirom found:

> Historically, schools, community-based services and businesses have travelled along separate paths, establishing areas of expertise and boundaries of activity. To a large extent, this has produced an environment of professional jealousies, a lack of cooperation, and limited understanding about available services and the potential for mutual benefit (Szirom 2001:6).

When these gulfs and barriers have been overcome, however, relationships have thrived with young people, schools and services reaping the rewards. Together, youth services and schools have been able to "wrap around" students, effectively responding to a range of needs and offering sustainable outcomes for all.

In December 2003 and January 2004, the Youth Coalition of the ACT met with a range of youth services and schools to identify some of the issues and barriers to effective partnerships and strategies that had been used to overcome them. This paper will explore these findings and place them within a current research context.

Key Informants

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges and thanks those who participated in key informant interviews. Those involved included: Lisa Kelly (LifeLine), Jill Buik (Communities@Work), Carrie Fowlie (Youth in the City), Kim Sattler (CET), Beth Mitchell (Ginninderra District High), Simon Vaughn (Kaleen High), Kim Giddings and Sid McRoy (Caroline Chisholm High), Jo Keighley (Alfred Deakin High), Jacqui Vaughn (Melrose High) and Carole Warner (Marist College Canberra)

Why Collaborate?

Over the past twenty years, a range of social and economic forces have led to an increase in pressures placed on young people and those who support them. Higher rates of unemployment, greater expectations on educational outcomes, lower opportunities and an increased cost of living all have had a significant on the lives of young people, often to the detriment of their mental and physical health and wellbeing and ability to navigate through difficult times.

At the same time, young people have, through a range of State-enforced "obligations", been encouraged to stay in school for longer making schools more responsible for addressing the needs of "at-risk young people". Chamberlain and Mackenzie suggest that this increased retention has meant that Australian schools have:

'… had to confront new issues, including teenage drug use, youth suicide, homelessness and early school leaving… [and that] reports have drawn attention to the crucial role of schools in an integrated approach to youth problems (1998:130).

Though many have risen to the challenge of better supporting young people "at-risk", it has become increasingly understood that as a single service provider schools are unable to effectively respond to the range of complex issues impacting on a young person's life. As the NCREL found:

…on their own, schools are neither capable of, nor responsible for, providing more responsive services and ensuring better results for children and their families… Schools, however, are increasingly recognising their changing role as essential partners in establishing collaboratives and partnerships (1997:1).

As schools are often not able to provide for the holistic needs of the young person, neither are youth services. Recognising the difficulties that young people who have not completed their education face when attempting to find employment and to successfully participate in community life, youth services have developed an increasing respect for schools and the outcomes they achieve for young people.

Additionally, it has been recognised that integrated support for young people, achieved through effective collaborations increase positive outcomes for young people. As Connel et al note:

"when supports and opportunities are plentiful, young people can and do thrive; when their environments are deficient or depleted, youth tend not to grow and progress." (2000)

Many youth services and schools have thus recognised the value and strength of developing partnerships to better support young people especially those "at risk".

The barriers

In her paper, Working Together: The How and Why of Partnerships, Dr Tricia Szirom identified a number of structural and human barriers to effective collaborations and partnerships including:

- entrenched professional identities including differing assumptions, values and beliefs, differing protocols for example about confidentiality issues, different language, terminology and jargon, lack of a shared agenda, goals and responsibility and differing professional cultures
- administration and governance including the need for more complex and more demanding administrative and governance arrangements, extensive time, energy, commitment and skill involved in collaborative decision-making, effects of leadership and staff changes;
- ownership and territoriality including the allocation of space in buildings, the different and competing demands for student time, the allocation of resources, preference of a school to remain focused exclusively on education, fear of one group taking all the power, exclusion of some participant groups for collaboration;
- funding including the provision of funding for the whole, rather than from separate agency resources and financial accountability for the whole program to one one body rather than to each separate source agency.
- Change processes including reluctance to see change and to be involved in altering current practices, a need for excellent leadership, a lack of sufficient time for undertaking the change process in an optimal manner, a tendency to impose change from the top rather than develop it collaboratively and the need for extensive professional development of all involved;

- Perceptions including the negative effects on school reputation and enrolments if the school is seen as a 'welfare school' as well as a reluctance of young people and families to use services if the services are stigmatised.

Developing Effective Partnerships

Recognising the strengths of effective partnerships, the Youth Coalition worked with a number of key stakeholders (listed above) to identify key aspects and better practice principles involved in developing them. Important characteristics included:

- having shared goals and visions;
- respecting diversity;
- developing trust;
- acknowledging strengths;
- respecting limitations and partner's needs;
- having a co-ordinated approach;
- having organisational support and resourcing;
- ensuring youth participation; and
- celebrating wins.

Effective partnerships have shared goals and visions

When talking about successful programs, youth workers and teachers most often shared experiences of activities where partners shared an understanding of what was trying to be achieved and the value of doing so.

They found that for a partnership to be effective, both youth workers and teachers must work together to identify and agree on desired results for students. This agreement needs to be clear so that all parties work to similar goals.

Partners need to be honest about the interests they bring to the partnership and what they need to get out of it and partnerships should take this into account. Ultimately, however, the project should be developed collaboratively with partners feeling as though "…'we' have a challenge, let 'us' work through it 'together'.

Developing this shared vision should occur from the very beginning - as one provider asserted "a healthy relationships between a school and a youth service involves negotiating program delivery and identifying the needs of young people together."

Wherever possible, these goals should be shaped with the input of students so their needs and interests might be recognised also.

Strategies identified:
- time is spent prior to program delivery where all partners can clarify their roles, expectations and goals
- *Memorandums of Understanding* between partners outlining program goals are developed
- clear communication channels are strengthened
- "checking in" occurs between partners before, during and after sessions

Effective partnerships respect diversity

As noted, both youth workers and teachers work with and for young people. What often makes them different, however, is the diversity of work context, practice, philosophy and focus.

This often comes to the fore at times when youth workers advocate for young people when they have issues or concerns about their involvement in school. In

such situations, both youth workers and teachers must understand each others' position and realise that … "we are allies not adversaries".

At the most basic level, youth workers and teachers must therefore develop an understanding about what the other does, what contexts they operate within and what learnings they bring to the program because, unfortunately, …"schools are still largely in the dark about what youth work actually entails" and vice versa.

As well as understanding, teachers and youth workers must respect this diversity and acknowledge differences. Wherever possible, partners should develop an *agreed way of working* that addresses such issues.

In particular, informants suggested that issues around confidentiality and privacy, mandatory reporting, a young person's right to participate in decision-making processes, discipline, sex and drug and alcohol issues, and parental involvement (including when to share information about programs) all needed to be discussed and resolved prior to the project delivery.

Strategies identified:

❑ teachers and youth workers spend time discussing the ways their approaches differ and how they can be used to complement each other;

❑ youth workers receive copies of school and Department policies including policies around health promotion and information provision;

❑ effective communication channels are opened with constant dialogue occurring

Effective partnerships value and have trust in partner's skills, strengths and experiences

Value and trust are vital aspects in the development and maintenance of effective partnerships. Partners need to recognise each others' skills, strengths and experiences and how these can be used during the program.

In particular, the strengths of the different professional groups should be acknowledged. At a broad level, teachers are able to provide ongoing educational and often social support to young people and engage them in the school as a community. Youth workers are "often more aware of the issues affecting young people" and are able to work with them in their own contexts.

Strategies identified:

- ❑ time is spent prior to program delivery where all partners can meet and share their own strengths and those of the wider project;
- ❑ programs are developed to reflect these strengths;
- ❑ schools demonstrate they value youth workers by maintaining regular contact, by providing suitable space in which to work, by inviting them to school events and meetings and publicly acknowledging their services;
- ❑ youth services demonstrate they value teachers by inviting them to staff meetings and social events, promote their involvement in programs and seek their input into program delivery.
- ❑ Youth workers and teachers engage in shared training where they can develop their understanding of the other's sector, work contexts and roles.
- ❑ Teachers and Youth workers are careful of the prejudices and hidden agendas and 'baggage' that they bring to the relationship and recognise the professionalism of their partners

Effective partnerships recognise the needs and limitations of partners and have realistic expectations

As recognising partners strengths is important so is recognising their needs and limitations. Partners need to be frank about the interests they bring to the partnership, their needs and the needs of their organizations and their expectations for the project.

These needs should be built into service design so that all partners feel comfortable. Goals should be achievable and the involvement of players' involvement realistic. As one respondent replied: ... "we have to be realistic about goals and timeframes otherwise we're going to fail."

Once realised, partners need to be respectful of these needs and limitations and ensure that no members feel pressured to work outside of these stated boundaries.

When additional resources are necessary (including time and staffing) or when the program diverts from its original direction partners should renegotiate their involvement.

Strategies identified:
- ❑ teachers and youth workers discuss their needs and limitations before and during the program delivery;
- ❑ teachers and youth workers regularly "check in" to ensure that these needs are being met;
- ❑ program goals and partner's involvement are re-negotiated as the activities change or when additional resources are necessary.

Effective partnerships are co-ordinated

Some of the greatest problems experienced by schools and youth services were as a result of poor co-ordination. Some youth workers talked about times when schools had not advertised groups or programs to young people, when spaces had not been organised or when the school had different ideas about program goals and delivery.

Schools also reported frustrations when youth services had not arrived at the times they had set, when workers did not follow through on promises and when sessions were not planned.

For the partnership to be effective, it must therefore be co-ordinated with players taking responsibility for their involvement and ensuring that these are being met.

Strategies identified:
- a key person is identified within the school as the community contact and maintains links with youth services;
- agreements (such as MOUs) are developed that are specific about expectations and roles of all partners
- a contact list is provided to youth services that includes key people in the school (including principal, deputy, welfare team, counsellor, VET co-ordinator etc)
- service provision by a variety of services must be co-ordinated to ensure that overlapping, conflicting messages and general over-servicing is reduced

Effective partnerships develop structural and institutional supports

Many of the informants asserted that for a collaboration to be effective and sustainable it could not be reliant on key individuals or charismatic leaders. Too often, they suggested, projects were left unfinished because teachers or youth workers left or were moved and because there was no real commitment or ability of the school or youth service to have it completed.

Additionally, informants asserted that projects needed to be supported by the wider school and youth service if they were to be affective. Projects were unsuccessful, they reported, if teachers not involved criticised the program to young people or were visibly unsupportive; if executive teachers did not provide adequate resources or sufficient time and space; if agreements were undermined or dismissed at crucial points in the relationship.

When the whole school was supportive, project outcomes were positive and sustained. Partners felt valued and encouraged and wins were celebrated widely.

Strategies identified:

- ❑ executive members of staff are involved in initial planning of the project and provide input into project aims and goals;
- ❑ executive members co-sign MOUs with participating teachers to ensure the wider school's commitment to the project;
- ❑ all teachers and youth workers are kept updated about project progress and successes; and
- ❑ teachers and youth workers are given opportunities to meet each other and forge informal relationships.

Effective partnerships engage and respect young people's involvement

Informants reported that projects were often more successful if they were developed in response to the expressed needs and wishes of young people and where young people were involved in their development and facilitation.

By scoping students' interests and goals, programs became more relevant and responsive and were generally better received than those developed without input.

From a philosophical level, youth workers in particular expressed the belief that young people should be involved in all decision-making that affected their lives and should therefore be actively engaged in defining project goals and outcomes.

Strategies identified:

- ❑ young people are given opportunities to provide input to the development and facilitation of projects. This might be sourced through focus groups, questionnaires or representation on a steering committee (for larger projects)
- ❑ young people are trained as peer educators and co-present or independently facilitate projects;
- ❑ feedback is sought from young people about the way that the project met / failed to meet their needs; and
- ❑ young people are involved in evaluating the project more broadly.

Effective partnerships celebrate wins, no matter how small

Informants reported the need for partners to reflect on their project and their partnership and to acknowledge their achievements throughout the process. This

ensured that all partners felt valued, were able to identify positives and shared a sense of satisfaction about their successes no matter how small.

Where possible, informants suggested that these "wins" should be publicised to the wider school and youth service community to develop a greater understanding and ownership of the process and to increase the willingness of the school to provide the project again.

Strategies identified:

- articles about the project are included in school and youth service newsletters;
- projects are advertised in local media and wins promoted;
- awards are publicly presented to participants and partners;
- reports include examples of positive feedback and outcomes; and
- partners are given opportunities to share their satisfaction and achievements with their peers.

Conclusions

Both youth workers and teachers provide invaluable supports to young people and the community. When possible, the capacity of schools and youth services to effectively respond to the broad needs of young people is increased dramatically through partnerships and collaborations; with youth workers, teachers and young people all benefiting greatly.

This paper has attempted to identify the key characteristics of effective partnerships between youth services and schools and to provide strategies for players to develop their relationships and to effectively BUILD A BRIDGE AND GET OVER IT.

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