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Creating Effective Community Partnerships for School Improvement: A Guide for School Leaders

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Creating Effective Community Partnerships for School Improvement: A Guide for School Leaders

Hazel M. Carter
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Education reform is a constant in ongoing academic conversations; however, the tools and resources necessary for that reform can be daunting or simply remain in the abstract world of theory and not action. *Creating Effective Community Partnerships* walks readers through the concrete process of partnering with other educational institutions, stakeholders, and community organizations, showcasing concrete examples to match the principles it advocates. As the title suggests, Carter more overtly targets administrators and administrators-in-training; however, this book is helpful for other stakeholders too. She especially calls for institutions at all levels to take part in conversations about educational reform and to refrain from playing the often easy but fruitless "blame game." Carter ventures to break down not only the requisite aspects of beneficial collaboration between schools and communities, but to reflect on her own institutional location. She further seeks to change the way leaders imagine resources, to "think of the community as a logical partner in bringing about success for students, their families, and school staff" (Carter xix). She urges school leaders to be innovative and to delve into the larger community to provide the best learning opportunities for students, especially those considered at risk of school failure. Throughout the book, Carter writes in a direct, no-frills fashion, supporting and justifying practices with educational research. The book's appendix offers examples from the two projects that are the focus of the book, specifically she shows readers how to craft practical agendas, budgets, timetables, lessons, and professional development workshop offerings. Such an appendix becomes a valuable tool for readers who are serious about the nuts and bolts of community collaboration.

It is worth noting that Carter organizes the book around two community partnerships: a six-year, grant-funded program focusing on middle school students—to prepare them for educational transitions—and a high school-college partnership that is funded publicly. Furthermore, she aligns eleven of the twelve chapters with the
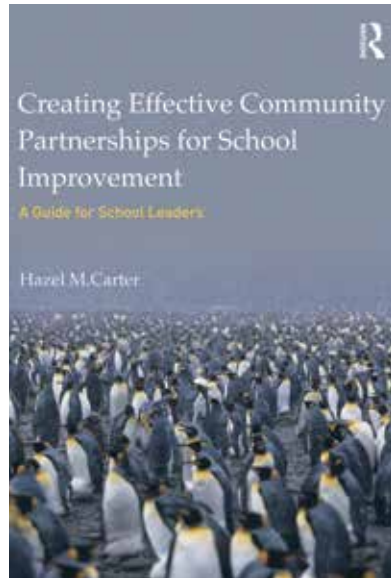
Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, and provides a sample course syllabus in the preface if instructors wish to use it as a textbook. The short chapters and recurring features—such as reflective exercises and portfolio building activities—make Carter's book easily adaptable for classroom use. Reflective exercises challenge readers to apply the book's concepts to their own situations and the portfolio-building activities help readers to compile a working collection of their ideas. Some of the chapters also include a "lessons learned" section in which the author reflects upon unforeseen circumstances in her collaborative experience and offers concrete recommendations; in doing so, she skillfully models the reflection process that should be integral within community partnerships.

Chapter 1 establishes numerous problems educators face and connects these recurring difficulties to concrete actions community members can take. She also argues that we all need to be concerned about the "social costs" of educational problems. Carter also asserts that the issue with college retention rates is not simply the problem of higher education—this issue spans the entire educational process, K–16. Chapter 2 then sets forth scaffolding to help readers discern who would make an effective collaborative partner and what different levels of collaboration entail. Carter emphasizes the importance of a shared vision, not just "for educators, but for the community at large" (15), and identifies specifically the key strategies for building an "educational collaborative team" (18).

In chapter 3, Carter discusses the importance of intentionally creating structures for community collaboration by showcasing what collaboration looks like in real situations. Chapter 4 focuses on the transition from middle school to high school, calling for these institutions to collaborate on this transition. In Chapter 5, Carter continues to focus on at-risk students, recognizing that they are the ones least likely to transition to college, let alone struggle through the transition unless they have a robust support network. Chapter 6 specifically addresses partnering with parents and the community in urban areas, though surely her recommendations are applicable to rural schools as well. Parental involvement and community support structures are both key, Carter notes, but often missing for at-risk students. In Chapter 7, Carter focuses on the need for schools to seek funding from private foundations, providing a helpful annotated list of foundations offering educational grants and guiding readers through the grant-writing process. While private funding sources are valuable in our current political and economic climate, it is worth mentioning that public funding sources have historically provided the bulk of funding for educational institutions based on the concept that an informed citizenry is superior to an ignorant one.

Carter rightly emphasizes the importance of teachers maintaining a close learning relationship with students; of course this relationship becomes strained due to neoliberalism as class sizes expand and machine grading replaces teachers guiding students through the writing process. In chapter 8, she recognizes the imperative role of the classroom teacher and advocates that "[o]ne of the most promising strategies for improving schools is giving teachers more control of schools and of what occurs in the classroom" (97). Chapter 9 emphasizes the role of the collaborative leader and calls for

a shift in educational culture. Carter maintains, "[a] school that does not have a culture of collaboration is not ready to receive [or extend] partnership programs" (114). Carter advocates for reading, writing, and study groups—of varied demographics—as one method to prepare a school for collaboration. Chapter 10 reflects on the results of student surveys from the college-readiness program. Carter also highlights the services offered to the students and argues for the importance of modifying collaborative programs to meet the needs of students deemed to be academically underprepared or otherwise at risk for failing school. Chapter 11 focuses on "Building Community through Professional Development," emphasizing the importance of teachers continually learning through grassroots teacher collaboratives to better guide students to success. Carter praises researcher Linda Darling Hammond's findings that "improving the expertise of teachers, dollar for dollar, results in far greater gains in student learning than do investments in tests, materials, or programs" (149). Chapter 12 reiterates the value of partnerships, advocates for administrators to recognize faculty who have leadership potential, and ends with a call to revolutionize the senior year of high school to partner with colleges and community organizations to help facilitate a better transition to the next phase of the student's development, writing, and learning.

Leaders, teachers, and community members, especially those new to community literacy work, can benefit from this book as it provides pragmatic recommendations to change systems that are failing educators and students alike. Carter's call to action entails becoming intentional about beginning and maintaining conversations with the key stakeholders involved in educational reform. Carter charts a course for how educational reform can be accomplished, recognizing that each situation and context will look a little different, especially when reflecting upon students', teachers', and community members' needs. While Carter acknowledges that this book is for all stakeholders, its primary target is school leaders. The two projects Carter features in this book highlight the need for strong leadership and the vision and management acumen necessary not only to fund but also to oversee changes to successful fruition. Having the right partnerships, people, and culture in place is imperative to this process—which may sometimes begin with the leaders, but is not possible to sustain without the rest of the organization understanding and working toward the same goal. While Carter provides a helpful foundation for why school and community partnerships need to exist, she also focuses significant time on workplace readiness and monetary loss if students do not finish school. The idea of citizenship was not always presented as overtly by Carter as it could have been, although undertones of citizenship are present. Thus, this book is most helpful for readers who want to engage in collective reform but aren't sure where to start. This book includes sections that might not be necessary for experienced leaders, but offers excellent resources to new leaders.

On the whole, Carter's book is teeming with resources and ideas and is ultimately a call to action, a call to leaders. However, the respect shown to all stakeholders, especially teachers, relies upon bottom-up approaches and methodologies. Perhaps this is because ultimately we are all leaders to some extent and we all must work together bring about the change we desire within our communities. As Carter maintains,

collaboration cannot just be small projects here and there, though there is certainly nothing wrong with light-touch approaches to community building. Carter's book is an important, theoretically sound, and workable resource which would have powerful impacts if approached with a disposition of openness.