

## FROM THE FIELD:

# Beyond Paper Partnerships: Building Deep Community Collaboration

By Andy Beck

For 25 years my team and I have travelled the country to create collaborative systems that better support young people. We often hear the rhetoric: “No organization, silo or sector can go it alone.” Never has this been so true.

We know that the strongest responses to community issues take hold when we are willing to work collaboratively across organizational lines.

Easy to say. Hard to do. True collaboration takes work and skill.

Here are six big lessons from our work, supporting everything from local school-community partnerships to big, ambitious adventures in federal interagency collaboration.

### #1: Communities are often “activity rich, yet systems poor.”

Most communities have wonderful activities and programs. Rather than connect and mutually reinforce each other, however, they often operate in isolation. We try to make the case we need more – more grants, more staff, and more money – when we aren’t collaborating to maximize what we already have. Imagine heading to the doctor, then to the lab for a blood test. Wouldn’t you want the lab to share your results with the doctor? Connecting and collaborating in systemic ways requires a

whole new set of behaviors and skills.

### #2: There is no Director of Collaboration or Office of Coordination.

We have yet to see this job description in any community. Every partnership needs to go through a process to create the glue that will bind partners and facilitate

### Big Lesson # 5: “Self-interest” in not a dirty term.

their ability to collaborate. Sometimes, a lead partner volunteers or is recruited to serve this key role. As a neutral party, we often find ourselves consulting at the early stages, kick-starting the process and helping partners create collaborative infrastructure that will sustain them.

### #3: Collaboration isn’t about splitting up the check. It’s about splitting up the work.

Organizations are often driven to collaborate as an RFP requirement, or because of diminishing resources or growing need. However, collaboration is not really engrained in our institutional culture. We often treat the opportunity to collaborate

as if it’s a special project, something we do on the margins of our work. If you find yourself at meetings – or in parking lots – scribbling out who’s getting how much money, you are in trouble.

### #4: Partnership is a verb, not a noun.

My third-grade English teacher taught me the difference between a noun and a verb. Partnership is not what you call yourselves, it is what you do together – and the act of partnering should never be confused with the vehicle created to do the work. Successful partnerships spend their time cultivating deep relationships and establishing a clear methodology for working together. In fact, we often tell partnership efforts to “lose the name and live a little...”

### #5: “Self-interest” is not a dirty term.

Partners are usually polite, deferential, even. When it comes to kids, we all want to help. If someone asks us to represent our organization at a meeting, we’ll attend. But then trouble sets in: lots of talk – not a lot of action. Eventually, we get more no-shows as partners drift away. To be sustainable – and drive systemic change – partners must identify and revisit regularly why they are at the table and what will keep them there. Identifying self-interests

can be rocket fuel for collaboration, helping partners zero in on shared interests and the value, purpose and priorities of their partnership effort.

### #6: It’s difficult to hold each other accountable when we don’t report to each other. But it can be done.

Unfortunately, partners often treat accountability as an afterthought, or hope that a work plan on paper will be the only tool needed. However, collaborators can graft some truly great accountability mechanisms into their work – practices that bring commitment, performance and people back from the parking lot, into the meeting room.

None of these ideas are difficult to understand. The need to work together across systems and across town is not hard to grasp. Yet as we bind efforts, we must get beyond rhetoric and find better approaches for coalescing the many dynamic moving parts that is partnership work.

*Andy Beck is the Executive Director of School & Main Institute, which supports partnerships on the federal, state and local levels to improve outcomes for young people, their organizations and the communities in which they live.*

## Partnerships at Work

### Springfield Parent Academy, Springfield, Mass.

[springfieldparentacademy.com](http://springfieldparentacademy.com)  
A unique citywide initiative led by the Springfield [Mass.] Public Schools in partnership with more than 60 businesses, community agencies, educational institutions and faith-based organizations that pools parent training expertise and opportunities.

### Rhode Island Shared Youth Vision: Collaborative Case Management

[risolutionsdesk.org](http://risolutionsdesk.org)  
A partnership of five state agencies and a

wide variety of local organizations collaborating to provide a strong shared or collaborative case-management system for youth with multiple barriers to success across Rhode Island.

### Malden’s Promise, Malden, Mass.

[mkaramcheti@malden.mec.edu](mailto:mkaramcheti@malden.mec.edu), [khayes@cityofmalden.org](mailto:khayes@cityofmalden.org)  
An emerging partnership effort engaging adult advocates (“Graduation Gurus”) designed to increase graduation rates and reduce the drop-out rate of high school students in Malden, Mass. This partnership,

consisting of more than 30 organizations, is led by the mayor’s office, the Malden Public Schools and a bevy of community-based organizations.

### Minnesota Shared Vision for Youth Activities - A Statewide Partnership Approach

[http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/All\\_Programs\\_Services/Office\\_of\\_Youth\\_Development/Minnesota\\_Shared\\_Vision\\_for\\_Youth\\_Activities/index.aspx](http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/All_Programs_Services/Office_of_Youth_Development/Minnesota_Shared_Vision_for_Youth_Activities/index.aspx)  
Minnesota’s Shared Youth vision partnership supports the development of broad youth partnerships at the state and regional levels so

that a variety of funding sources can be used to create a seamless array of services to meet the needs of participants for comprehensive, intensive, and long-term services.

### Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development

<http://www.icyd.org/index.html>  
The Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development Council (ICYD) is a state-led interagency initiative designed to better align policies and programs and to encourage collaboration among multiple state and community agencies on youth-related issues.