

Partnership with a Shared Mission

Philip Weinberg

A principal and a partner organization work in tandem to lead improvement in a New York City high school.

Located in a Gothic-style building in Brooklyn, overlooking New York Harbor, the School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology was designed to be a school for the twenty-first century. As its name implies, it has a heavy emphasis on technology, with a television studio, its own Web server, and technology infused throughout the curriculum. It has also been recognized for its global education program and humanities curriculum, and it is part of the Transatlantic School Innovation Alliance, a partnership with schools in London that is supported by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Under a system established by the New York City Department of Education, the school has formed a partnership with New Visions for Public Schools, a local nonprofit organization, to provide support and assistance. The school's principal, Philip Weinberg, spoke to *Voices in Urban Education* editor Robert Rothman about the partnership and his role as school leader.

Tell me about your school.

We're located in Brooklyn, New York. There are about 1,250 students in attendance. We serve grades nine through twelve. We're pretty representative of the borough of Brooklyn demographically, or at least socio-economically. We're relatively poor; there's a high percentage, and in our school especially, of Latino students. Seventy percent [are eligible for] Title I.

What kinds of partnerships do you have with community organizations?

The chief partnership right now is with New Visions, which is a new way the Department of Education is running schools. Other partnerships have been

on much smaller scales, with local community groups down in Sunset Park, who worked with agencies we could refer students to for everything from employment to health services to general family counseling and stuff like that.

What is your role as a leader in a system with partnerships? How might that be different from a system in which you are only responsible for your own building?

In a crude sense, the biggest difference is that I have to figure out how this partnership can benefit the larger school community and make sure that we're aligned so that the work of the partnering organization supports the mission of the school.

Philip Weinberg is principal of the School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology in Brooklyn, New York.

The difference in the kind of partnerships the Department of Education has created now is that the partner fulfills some of the role of the person who used to be my boss, who was the superintendent. By disempowering the superintendent and, in name at least, empowering the principal, the partner has to take on some of the jobs of the superintendent without any of the regulatory power the superintendent had. It's been interesting to watch the partner try to negotiate that difference, try to be the support organization without having any regulatory authority. They're great at it in some ways. But it must be frustrating if you can see a way a school can get better or do the right thing and they choose not to do it. Four years ago a superintendent would have said, much like a parent, I don't care if you don't want to do it, you have to do it, because I know what's best for you. Now that interaction can't exist. It would be interesting to hear from a group like New Visions how they're negotiating that aspect of working with people.

The sooner we get to understand the folks with whom we work and their strengths and the things that they can offer our community, the sooner we can negotiate a good working relationship.

How do you go about aligning the work of the school with that of the partner organization?

Like most things in most places, it really is about people. And so the sooner we get to understand the folks with whom we work and their strengths and the things that they can offer our community, the sooner we can negotiate a good working relationship and a relationship that's beneficial to the school.

Did your preparation as a principal provide you with the skills to do that?

It depends on what you mean by preparation. The academic training I had to be a school leader, as most folks would say, was not about being a principal. Academic programs for school leaders are really just certificate programs.

The training I really had was with the previous principal of our school, when I worked as an assistant principal. One of the things that I think he was masterful at was knowing the folks around him, both inside the school and outside, and figuring out how to make sure that we were well positioned to work well with them.

How do partners hold one another accountable?

That's going to be dependent on the formation of each different partnership and what people want from it. There are tons of partnerships that schools have where the outside organization has a grant and so they have their focus on making sure they fulfill the terms of their grant, no matter what the school needs or wants. And so they'll hold the school accountable for making sure they get the information they need to meet their funder's criteria. We'll participate or not participate based on whether we feel that the grant is good for the school.

In other instances, like in our working relationship with New Visions, because we both know we're going to be here for a long time and working together, we tend to be more open in terms of a dialogue about what's working and what's not working and how we can work well together. The interesting thing about this partnership the city's created, these new kinds of working relationships, is that in the end, at least from my work with New Visions, they seem to have very little invested in being right or getting what they want and more invested in making sure they're serving us. I think they're trying to provide ideas that will better serve schools, but like a good teacher, they want us to grasp those ideas ourselves and to name them as our own, rather than having to lecture and say, "Now I want you to know this and do this." And it's been an interesting approach.

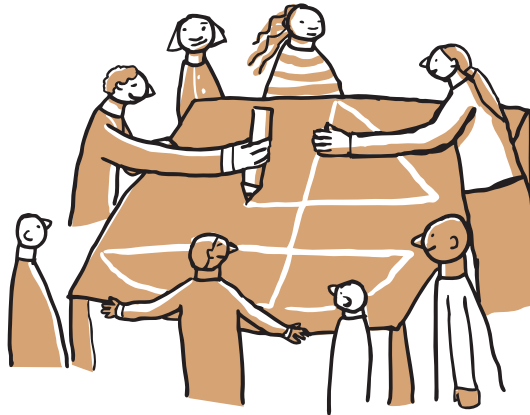
They've been the most successful partnership I feel like we've had. Partly because their investment is in seeing us do well. They're not fulfilling the terms of some grantor.

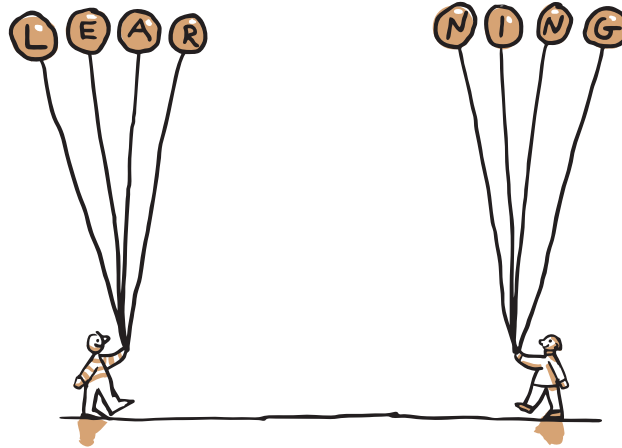
Has partnership changed the way you look for staff? Do you look for people with a particular set of skills who can work with outside organizations?

No. The [liaison to the] outside organization is going to be me and the administrative staff, for the most part. If the outside organizations have things to offer, we find staff for them to work with and then go forward.

The business of running schools is not dealing with kids, for the most part. No matter how successful or interesting it is, it's an ancillary part of education.

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I understand the district set up this arrangement, where you get to choose the organization you wanted to work with. Do they provide additional support, either linking you with a partner or working through some issues if you might have some?

They probably would provide support with issues if you had some. It's interesting, because the Department of Ed plays two roles here. It is one of the support organizations, too. So they're a little bit schizophrenic.

As with many things with the Department of Ed these days, there was a business model that they were following. Somebody with an MBA had the idea. They never quite thought through what their role was. We're in the third year of this now. The first time through, it happened too fast. The information was available in print and you could go to a meet-and-greet fair, sort of a "speed dating" kind of thing to get to know people. Much like other organizations, I think what's happened since then is people talk. Word of mouth has been a much more valuable tool in terms of discerning how things work,

whom you might work well with, and the negotiating the partnership stuff happens in a less formal way, because the Department of Ed has tried to decentralize this part of its work.

There's the ability to move, which is one of the ways the department facilitates the process. But I can't speak well to this because I haven't had a problem. We've worked very nicely with our partner.

Just from being a principal for quite some time now, I've seen the many iterations of the Department of Ed over the last nine or ten years. This is functioning nicely for our school and for us, partly because I had the experience of having a boss and knowing what would have been expected of me, and partly because what this group does is very smart and thoughtful and helpful.