TIPS FOR FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNER

Community Schools are one of Mayor de Blasio’s signature education initiatives – one which puts community partners and expanded learning opportunities in the center of school support. Over the past couple of weeks, the City’s approach to community schools has become more clear with the establishment of a new Office of Community Schools at the Department of Education, and the release of an RFP for non-profit organizations to partner with Renewal Schools to implement a community schools approach.

The RFP describes four key elements: coordination, parent engagement, mental health services and expanded learning time. As part of the Department of Education’s Renewal Schools initiative, each school will also institute changes to its instructional practices based on a needs assessment conducted this spring. The coordination of these approaches has tremendous opportunity to transform the experiences of young people.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS THAT CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

School teams will have an opportunity to interview the organizations that submitted the best proposals in the spring, but conversations between schools and potential partners are underway. After 16 years of supporting schools and community organizations to work together, we know that finding a perfect fit is a complicated process, but asking a few strategic questions early on can make all the difference.

• What are our school’s priorities for next year? What are existing strengths and where are there gaps?
• What partners are already in the school? Do current partners have the interest and capacity to be the lead partner in coordinating the community schools elements? If so, they still need to apply. If not, what role might they play next year? (Note the lead partner will hire the Community Schools Coordinator who will act as primary liaison with the school and
is responsible for arranging, coordinating and implementing services to meet the four key elements described in the RFP.)

- What are our assumptions about what a partner should do in the school or how a partner should act? How can we communicate these assumptions to potential partners to be sure we’re on the same page?

- What are our must-haves in a partner? What do we really need our partner(s) to be able to do?

- What can the school offer to make sure the partnership is a good one (e.g., expertise, professional development, space, equipment, time, data analysis)?

It is a good idea for potential partners and school leaders to meet and take a tour of the school together. Talk about the school’s goals, culture and vision. Share your assumptions about partnership and your plans for management and communication. When you meet with potential partners, ask:

- What are your organization’s strengths and how are they relevant to working in this environment, in this community?

- Where are you flexible as an organization, and where are you committed to your model/framework (what are your “non-negotiables”)?

- Which key elements do you feel that you have the capacity to lead in our school? In what areas would you subcontract and why?

- How would you ensure that students are engaged and participate in a balanced mix of engaging activities during expanded learning?

- How do you handle behavioral issues? How can you help build a strong, productive school culture?

- What do you envision in terms of staffing to meet our goals (e.g., expertise, background, educational attainment, cultural assets and professional experience and supervisory structure)?

- How do you set high expectations for your staff and for students? How do you assess program quality?

- What is your experience with the surrounding neighborhood of the school?

- What is your experience with managing multiple sources of public funding?
• What is your experience managing multiple partners in a school or building? What is your approach?

• What is the total number of schools and students your organization intends to serve next year? What does growth look like, and how do you know you have the capacity for this growth?

• How do you communicate with students’ families?

A few resources that school leaders might find helpful:

• If you would like to know what organizations operate in your area, feel free to call TASC 646 943 8700, or plug your zip code into DYCD’s website to see a list of contracted agencies serving that ZIP code.

• See the following page for Attachment D of the Community Schools RFP for interview questions you will use to select a partner in the spring.

WE CAN HELP

As you think this through, or are looking for new partners who can help you meet your school goals, TASC can help. Email Laura Scheck, Director of School Support, at lscheck@expandedschools.org.
ATTACHMENT D: SCHOOL INTERVIEW ITEMS

In each of the five topic areas below, overall responses will be rated according to the following scale: 5 = Excellent, 4 = Very Good, 3 = Average, 2 = Below Average, 1 = Poor, 0 = Not Responsive. The maximum score for the school interview is 25 points.

1. Community School Vision

Briefly describe your vision for the community school with respect to the following:

• Coordinating and supporting whole school change to drive increased academic achievement
• Personalized learning for whole school, targeted and high needs students
• Engagement of families, community partners and the larger school community

2. Understanding the student population and community at the proposed school

What are the opportunities of work you see that will help drive change at this school, and what are two to three major challenges you might face that you would need to address?

How would you work with the school to meet the needs of the school community and what are a few critical first steps you will need to take?

3. Engaging parents and families

Describe how you would regularly engage families as partners and leaders to encourage and retain broad based participation, decision-making and problem-solving in the development of the Community School Plan.

How would you ensure clear and inclusive communication with parents and community members?

4. Partner organizations and collaborations

Identify and describe possible partner organizations and state how the collaboration would help meet the needs of the school.

Explain how you would collaborate with existing partners and utilize existing resources.

5. Expanded learning/enrichment

Describe your vision for how expanded learning/enrichment activities would contribute to the goals of the community school.

Discuss your success in implementing expanded learning/enrichment activities.