Partnering for Success: The Creation of Urban Schools That Work Better

Janice M. Hirota, Robert L. Hughes, and Ronald Chaluisan

A partnership strategy under way in New York City suggests how links between schools and community organizations can enhance education.

A nascent effort to move toward the creation of a smart school system can be found in the work of the New Century High School (NCHS) initiative, an experiment that now includes eighty-eight New York City public schools and that will ultimately affect nearly 40,000 students.[1] Launched in 2001 to create new small schools to replace large failing high schools, New Visions for Public Schools has worked with organized stakeholders in the public educational system, such as the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), United Federation of Teachers, Council of Supervisors and Administrators, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Open Society, to rethink how public high schools can be internally restructured.

One notable feature of the initiative is the integration of an array of community and civic resources into the fiber and operation of schools through the creation of partnerships that bring together school staff – principal, teachers, guidance counselor, and others – and personnel from "lead organizational partners."[2] The goal is to support the social and developmental well-being of students while promoting their intellectual growth and academic achievement.

The partnership strategy – both the concept and actual working partnerships – bridges the efforts of the New Century initiative in New York City with those of the 2005 Children's Act in Tower Hamlets, London, United Kingdom. Despite notable differences between the two initiatives in scale and range, there are coincidences of analysis and aims, including the urgency to improve outcomes for children and youth and the perceived need for radical change at both systemic and individual levels. In both instances, partnering has become a means for breaking through professional and institutional walls; bringing new ideas to the solution of long-term social issues; and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for children's development and achieve-

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1 Eighty-eight New Century schools have opened as of September 2008; the final two will open in September 2009, for a total of ninety New Century schools.

2 "Lead organizational partner" or "lead partner" refers to the organization that joins in partnership with school-based NYCDOE staff to create and sustain a New Century school.

ment, and – critically – providing a vehicle for taking on that responsibility. In addition, the presence of an external actor – New Visions in New York City and national and local governmental offices in the United Kingdom – plays a decisive role in setting the venue and impetus for partnerships.

This article is based on a long-term study of New Century's hallmark strategy of school-based partnerships. It draws in part on case studies of five robust and successful partnerships in schools with strong student achievement and reflects on some of the accomplishments – as well as challenges – of implementing effective cross-institutional partnerships. The article also suggests some practical problems inherent in establishing a smart educational system within an American context.

The New Century Initiative

New Century schools are committed to graduate at least 80 percent of their students with a New York State high school diploma. To this end, they aim to unite rigorous academics and personalized supports as critical features of effective education – especially for students who are disengaged from and unprepared for high school–level work. New Visions believes that schools cannot – and should not – be solely responsible for meeting student needs. Instead, schools must draw on community, social service, and other civic resources in order to be effective.

The first New Century schools opened in 2002. Each school began with a ninth-grade class, adding a class in each of the following three years.[3] The oldest schools had their first graduating classes in June 2006; the youngest are en route to becoming full high schools. The schools have been challenged by the high poverty of their students, substandard facilities in the form of large school buildings divided into multiple small schools, and extreme overcrowding. Yet even as the initiative continues to evolve, research points to promising early outcomes:[4]

- The 78 percent average graduation rate for the New Century class of 2006 exceeded the citywide average graduation rate by 20 percentage points.

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3 Some New Century schools include middle grades as well, opening with a sixth or seventh and ninth grades and growing two grades each subsequent year until reaching full size.

4 See the discussion of the NCHS initiative on the New Visions Web site, especially the *Policy Studies Associates Final Evaluation Report,* October 2007, available at <www.newvisions.org/schools/nchs/evidence.asp>.

- Only 3 percent of New Century students dropped out over four years, compared with 15 percent of high school students citywide.
- Average daily attendance of New Century students was 84 percent, compared with 81 percent for students citywide, with the median New Century attendance rate reaching 91 percent.

Preliminary Conceptions of New Century Partnerships

Each New Century school is expected to embody a working partnership between school-based staff and organizational personnel who, together, conceptualize, implement, and sustain their school. The New Century partnership strategy is akin to but different from previous working relationships between schools and organizations. As in earlier configurations, organizations are sources of expertise, practice, and resources that can complement school offerings. The strategy, however, eschews the traditional limits that restrict organizations to peripheral engagement in, for example: after-school and other out-of-school programs; service provision, including social supports and remedial learning; or "extracurricular programs," often viewed as non-academic, such as literary or performing arts. These roles and services might complement but generally do not affect the teaching and learning at the center of the school.

Instead, the New Century strategy aims squarely for a relationship in which partners – school and organizational staffs – actively share responsibility for student learning and achievement, developing schools that increase student supports and broaden approaches to teaching and learning. Such partnerships also enable organizations to play effective, integrated roles in strengthening education in the city.[5] The following tenets, in place from the initiative's start, demonstrate the mandate's openness to many variations within the partnership framework:

- *Lead organizational partners can be from any institutional sector,* including higher education, social services, cultural and civic centers, youth development, and so forth, thereby ensuring the infusion of a broad array of interests, skills, and approaches to help engage and support students.
- *Organizational partners can play a variety of roles in schools,* such as provider of "direct services to students and [their] families," supporter of the school's curriculum and pedagogy, and supplier of necessary "political will… [to] stretch the realm of [educational] possibility."[6]

5 In addition to the lead organizational partner, New Century schools work with a range of organizations that play more focused roles in such areas as professional development, out-of-school programs, content-area supports, school culture, and so forth. Michele Cahill (1996) provides valuable analysis of ways schools and communities have worked together. New Century partnerships push the boundaries of previous models in uniting collaborative work across multiple arenas including school leadership, academic endeavor, and youth development.

6 November 8, 2001, agenda for "Open Discussion for Interested Community-Based Organizations, Cultural Institutions, Colleges, and Businesses," hosted by the South Bronx Churches for the Bronx New Century High School Initiative, p. 2.

• *School-based partnerships can be structured in many different ways, for example: acting as co-leaders; developing multiple other partnerships, in addition to the lead partner, each with a specific focus; ensuring lead partner participation in both the academic and leadership spheres of the school; or creating distinct areas in which each partner works.*

In addition, the initiative designated the organizational partner as fiscal agent for the initiative funds, which have been $400,000 over the initial four years of the school; these monies are to support the school, including the work of the organization. Here, New Visions meant to create leverage for the lead partner as it worked to establish its voice in meaningful work and decision making within the school.

Early Challenges to New Century Partnering

Discovering ways to make two institutional entities into a viable, sustainable working partnership – especially within the highly traditional arena of public education – has demanded a redefining of roles and responsibilities on both sides as the actors, together, reframe, negotiate, and create the means – the strategies, structures, procedures, roles, and tasks – for their collaborative effort. Successful New Century partners have had to resolve some major issues in their work together.

Working against Established Roles and Expectations

Culturally, the school is an established institution that "over long periods of time…ha[s] remained basically similar in [its] core operation, so much so that these regularities have imprinted themselves on students, educators, and the public as the essential features of a 'real' school" (Tyack & Cuban 1995, p. 7). NYCDOE staff members move with authority in their schools – with a legitimacy and knowledge born of professional training and experience, assigned responsibility, convention, and institutional expectations and support. Within traditional and commonsense perspectives, principals, teachers, and other NYCDOE staff *belong* in a school; they are, in fact, often seen *as* the school. Outside organizations, on the
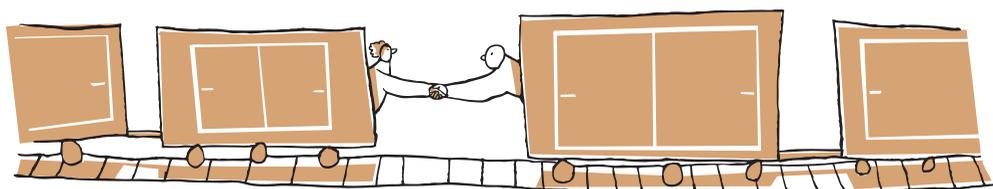
other hand, conventionally hold *peripheral relationships* to schools as vendors, service providers, coaches, and consultants – and in the past, the involvement of outside organizations has been at the discretion of school personnel.

Partnering in Central Arenas of the School

To glean the most from a New Century partnership, organizations must link their work to the school's central mission of teaching and learning and supporting student achievement and to the school's leadership in shaping how its aims, priorities, and values are actually put into practice. Despite their role in designing schools, many partnering organizations faced difficulties entering into the life of the school, especially given their lack of traditional roles, legitimacy, authority, or responsibilities.
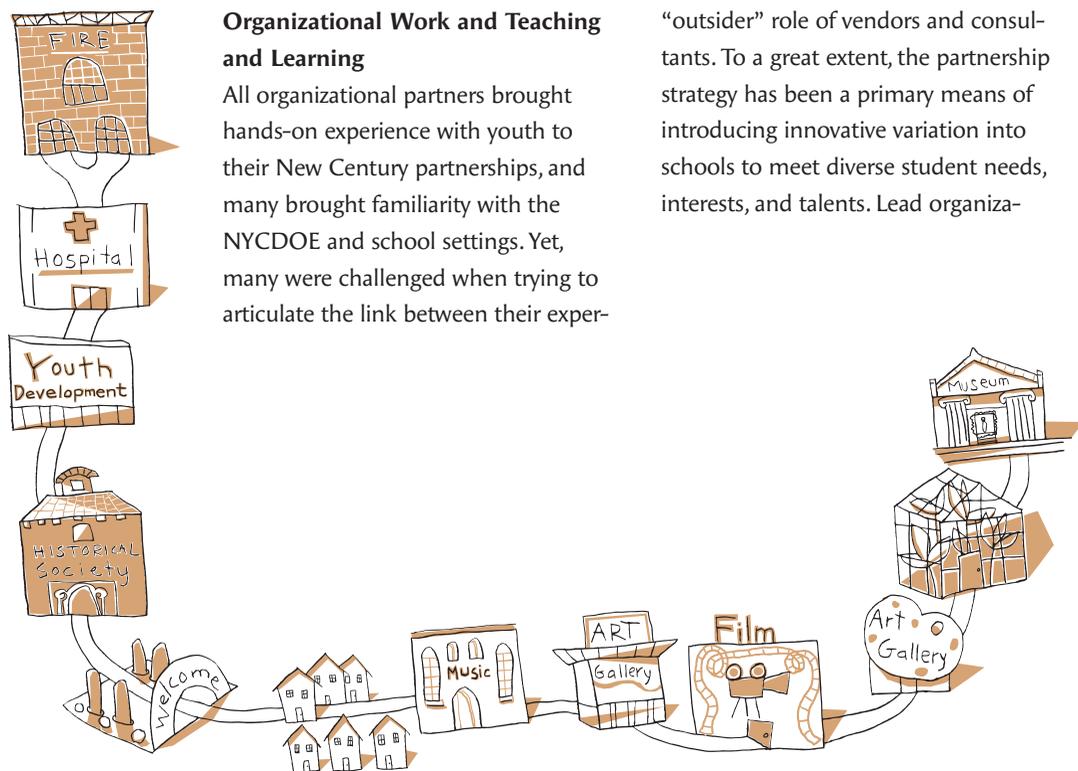
Clarifying the Link between Organizational Work and Teaching and Learning

All organizational partners brought hands-on experience with youth to their New Century partnerships, and many brought familiarity with the NYCDOE and school settings. Yet, many were challenged when trying to articulate the link between their exper-

tise and school-day teaching and learning. At other times, it was the inability of principals and teachers to recognize the potential of organizational links that obstructed the practice of deep partnering. Early on, New Visions devised ways such as asset mapping to help organizational partners spell out what they brought to the educational process.

What Successful Partnering Offers

Architects of the New Century initiative envisioned lead partners with a broad array of foci, expertise, approaches, and reasons for enlisting in school reform, thereby enhancing schools' ability to engage and support students with different interests and skill levels. And, indeed, a range of organizations seized the opportunity to become partners, moving beyond the more typical "outsider" role of vendors and consultants. To a great extent, the partnership strategy has been a primary means of introducing innovative variation into schools to meet diverse student needs, interests, and talents. Lead organiza-

tional partners include: arts organizations, such as museums, theater and film groups, art galleries, and college music departments; community-based service providers, including settlement houses with community-building perspectives; institutions of higher education; social and cultural groups such as botanical gardens, public parks, and historical societies; youth-development organizations; and city institutions such as hospitals and the fire department.

Figure 1 on page 42 uses the five case study schools with successful partnerships to illustrate the range of organizations and ways they participate in their schools.

Successful partnerships can bring a range of aims to their youth development and educational efforts. Global Kids and Epic Theatre Ensemble are committed to developing community leaders, engaged local and global citizens, and critical thinkers about social and political issues. East Side House Settlement and Mosholu Montefiore Community Center stress college preparation courses, educational counseling, and career readiness. Brooklyn Botanic Garden and Prospect Park Alliance integrate their field studies methodology, especially in science, into an overall approach to teaching and learning and extend this hand-on emphasis into the development of out-of-school internships and mentorships for students.

Unlike schools, organizational partners do not have built-in audiences for their programs. Instead, they have to market their efforts, developing activities that engage youth in their learning. At the same time, organizations are less constrained by the daily round of classes and have the time and ability to create lecture series for students, institute college tours, organize and manage schoolwide student confer-

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ences, staff "college rooms," oversee the production of the senior class yearbook, engage professionals as mentors, and link students to academically related summer programs such as a National Audubon camp or the Peace Boat international experience.

Successful partnering organizations actively support students' social and emotional growth in myriad ways. For example, when co-teaching classes, Epic Theatre, Global Kids, and East Side House Settlement staffs employ interactive exercises that help students strengthen their presentational, leadership, and collaborative skills, at the same time building productive classroom cultures. Brooklyn Botanic Garden and Global Kids staffs oversee ambassador programs, teaching upper-level students to mentor incoming freshmen. Mosholu Montefiore Community

Organizational Partner School and Year Opened	Primary Scope	Major Focus	Organization's Main Work in School
East Side House Settlement Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School 2002	Community-based (affiliated with citywide United Neighborhood Houses)	Direct service/community building with major emphasis on education	• College readiness/ awareness, including developing curricula and co-teaching classes • Foster college-going expectations • Youth development • Manage after-school classes and schoolwide activities • Participate in leadership of school
Brooklyn Botanic Garden Prospect Park Alliance* Brooklyn Academy of Science and Environment 2003	Citywide (committed to the local community; also known nationally and internationally	Social/cultural	• Field studies approach, especially in science • Develop curricula and co-teach classes • Develop internships • Environmental awareness • Participate in leadership of school
Epic Theatre Ensemble High School for Writing and Communication Arts 2004	Citywide	Arts and civic engagement	• Theater as entry/support for building literacy skills • Develop curricula and co-teach classes • Foster citizenship skills and leadership capacity • College awareness • Participate in leadership of school
Global Kids, Inc. High School for Global Citizenship 2004	Citywide	Education and youth development	• Develop hands-on curricula to engage and build student skills • Co-teach classes • Advisory classes • Create schoolwide, student-run conferences and other events • Foster citizenship/leadership skills and global and local community perspectives • Participate in leadership of school
Mosholu Montefiore Community Center Marie Curie School for Medicine, Nursing, and the Health Professions 2004: first ninth grade 2005: first seventh grade	Community-based (affiliated with the citywide United Neighborhood Houses)	Direct services/ community building	• College and career awareness/readiness • Build school culture • Support advisory • Help develop and oversee medical internships that are core to the school's curriculum • Youth development • Participate in leadership of school

Figure 1: Lead organizational partners in five case study schools

*Note: This is a unique partnership in which two organizations act together as lead partner to the school.

Center staff help students employ methods of self-reflection and goal setting as part of building leadership skills and internalizing high expectations.

The partnering organizations are also involved in preparing students for college, including: providing information on college options; administering career aptitude/interest surveys; overseeing college trips; assisting with SAT preparation, personal essays, and college and financial aid applications; running an organizational scholarship program; and assuring and reassuring students that they can succeed in college.

Successful organizational partners bring their real-world know-how to dealing with typical issues in school-system bureaucracies. They utilize their insiders' knowledge when listening to and commenting on school quandaries and apply their outsiders' perspectives to open schools up to new approaches and understandings.

At the same time, organizational partners, it is true, are not held to the same measures of accountability for student achievement as schools and their faculties. In New York City, schools are graded according to the improvement in student achievement, and repeated failure can mean that schools are closed and principals' tenure is subject to revocation and termination. Organizational staffs recognize that such possibilities are far less likely for them and their organizations. But successful partnering depends in part on the organizations' own sense of responsibility for student outcomes and their commitment to their schools, as demonstrated in organizations' willingness to stake their reputations, spend political capital, assure their

boards of directors, request funding from foundations, and invest their staffs' time and energy. Over and over, these administrators and staff members talk about their schools as part of their organizations; in that sense, their accountability is, in the end, to their own organizational values and mission.

Student Outcomes

The question always arises: Does partnering affect student achievement? Although not necessarily causal, some achievements in the five case study schools are of interest. Student-performance metrics drawn from the NYCDOE's 2007 Progress Reports on areas with strong organizational partner involvement are shown in Figure 2 on page 44.[7]

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7 The NYCDOE annually rates each public school on a number of metrics and gives the school an overall grade for the year's performance, available publicly in the school's Progress Report, regarding school environment, performance, progress, and special populations. Figure 2 draws on the performance section of the 2006–2007 progress reports (the most recent available), which includes several graduation-related metrics. Each metric is applied for each school in the context of the *city as a whole* and of the forty schools, or *peer group,* with the most similar student population, as defined by eighth-grade scores on English language arts and math examinations (twenty schools with scores above the target school and twenty below). The NYCDOE establishes a *city horizon* and a *peer horizon,* which represent the historical distribution of scores within the city and within a school's peer group, and a school's score is compared with these horizons. If a school scores 1.07 on the math examination, its students performed slightly better than expected based on their eighth-grade scores. Historically, its peer schools may have scored anywhere from a .57 to a 1.57 on this metric (excluding the top and bottom 2.5 percent to account for outliers). The school would therefore receive a 50 percent as its peer horizon score because it falls at the midpoint between the top and bottom of the scale. A city horizon or peer horizon score near 100 percent means that the school is performing at the top of the historical range. If a school exceeds this range, it can score above 100 percent. (Source: Brad Gunton, senior program officer, New Visions Data Team)

School Organizational Partner	Organizational Focus	Selected School Performance Based on NYCDOE 2007 School Progress Reports
Bronx High School for Writing and Communication Arts Epic Theatre Ensemble	Theater as entry/support for building literacy skills	• Scores 87.4 percent, near the upper extreme of performance on the English Regents examination, compared with schools whose students enter high school with similar skill levels (its peer horizon). • Compared with all city schools, including some whose students enter high school much better prepared in math and literacy, the school – with a city horizon score of 78.2 percent – places higher than most schools.
Brooklyn Academy of Science and the Environment Brooklyn Botanic Garden Prospect Park Alliance	Field studies approach to academic studies, especially in science	• Scores 93.4 percent, at the upper extreme of performance on the science Regents examination, compared with schools whose students enter high school with similar skill levels (its peer horizon). • Compared with all city schools, including some whose students enter high school much better prepared in math and literacy, BASE – with an 83.9 percent score – still outperforms how schools have historically performed. • Forty-three percent of the class of 2009 have passed a second advanced science Regents examination, one that is not required for graduation.
Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School East Side House Settlement	College and career awareness/readiness	• Graduated 74.2 percent of its class of 2007, a rate above the midpoint of both the city and peer horizons, earning the school an A on its Progress Report. • Of the 61 graduating seniors in 2007, 55 enrolled in college and, according to ESH administrators, continue to do well a year later.

Figure 2: School performance based on NYCDOE 2007 school progress reports

How Strong Partnerships Operate

It must be said that, to date, successful New Century partnerships are the exceptions, not the rule. Most partnerships do not provide the high degree of quality, integrated effort, imagination, and steadfast dedication reflected above. But clearly partnering *can work*, and work well. What, then, makes for effective school-based partnerships? Partnerships that successfully engage students in learning, raise students' expectations of themselves and of each other, open new worlds of experience and learning, strengthen school-community bonds, and improve student achievement share a number of structural elements in common. These structural elements are described in this section.

Stability and Evolution of the Partnership Relationship

Partnership stability characterizes the five study schools. In each case, particular organizational staff and the principal were central to the planning and establishment of the school. Joint work from the earliest days of school conceptualization through the challenges and rewards of implementation has allowed these partners – school-based NYCDOE staff and organizational staff – to develop structures and processes

of collaboration, experience each other's commitment to the school and its students, and create cross-institutional relationships of trust and high expectations.[8] Such early partnering, it is true, may not be an option for all partnerships, but it is useful to note that trust built over time is critical for developing joint aims, approaches, and work.

At the same time, the ability of these partners to adapt and change is critical to the health of the relationship. In one school, some teachers grew concerned when the partner organization played a highly visible role, leading faculty meetings when the principal was away. In response, the principal, at the suggestion of organizational staff, created a school committee including teachers, thereby allowing teachers to play stronger leadership roles. The partnership remains solid. In another school, the schedule that had organizational staff working intensively with all students was not feasible as the school expanded from just the ninth-grade to a full-sized high school. Several schools now structure their curricula to ensure that all ninth-grade students are fully involved with the partnering organization, allowing maximum exposure to organizational offerings at the earliest stage of students' high school careers. Then, as students move to higher grades, they have the option to continue participating in organizational programs and classes.

Partnering as a Balancing Act

In strong New Century partnerships, principals welcome organizations' expertise and support organizational participation both in schools' central task of teaching and learning and in school leadership. Such support does not depend on personal endorsement; instead, principals have implemented structures and processes that institutionalize organizational partners' roles, ensuring and sustaining their participation. Four organizations in three schools co-teach content-area classes; one co-teaches mandatory, graded, credit-bearing college-preparation courses, and the sixth is intimately linked to the health careers internships central to the school's course of study. Organizational staffs also attend faculty meetings, sit on school leadership committees, participate in hiring new faculty, take on administrative tasks, and/or assist principals in thinking through curricular, faculty, scheduling, and other issues. At the same time, these organizations recognize and support the principal as the leader of the school.

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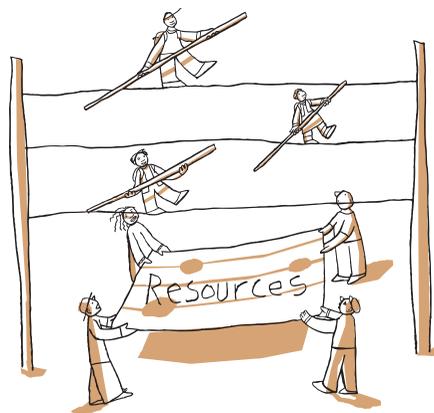
8 In July 2008, two of the principals left their schools, one to retire and the other to do other education reform work. The founding organizational partners remain in all five schools.

Partnering provides organizations with an arena for learning, a place to test and refine programmatic models and to implement aspects of their organizational missions, including strengthening their communities and building a skilled and engaged citizenry. At the same time, partnerships allow schools to enhance students' experience.

Partnering as a Mutual Benefit

In successful partnerships, participants derive specific, tangible, and meaningful benefits from the arrangement. Thus, all of these partnering organizations view the school as a way to develop or extend services that they are already offering and deepening their involvement with young people. Partnering provides organizations with an arena for learning, a place to test and refine programmatic models and to implement aspects of their organizational missions, including strengthening their communities and building a skilled and engaged citizenry.

At the same time, partnerships allow schools to enhance students' experience. Beyond the presence of additional caring and committed adults to support students, organizational capacity – in terms of skills, knowledge, staff, and time – allows attention to work that school staff may not be able to cover, such as concentrated focus on college readiness or building leadership skills. Across the five schools, the six organizations, supported and instituted by structures that the principal has put into place, take on administrative, school culture, or youth development tasks, such as organizing and managing all after-school programming, bringing in teaching artists, organizing all school trips, securing a grant to support a photography workshop and exhibition, or developing a lecture series. Organizations also help support teachers, bringing curricular ideas and tools, demonstrating classroom teaching techniques, consulting about particular students, and, at times, providing individualized professional development. And because organizational partners know their schools, they can integrate all these pieces into the framework and fabric of the school.

Partnering Integrates Organizations into Their Schools

In a successful partnership, the principal establishes structures and processes that integrate the organizational partner into the schools and allow the organization to participate fully in multiple arenas, especially in both the teaching and learning at the core of the school's work and the leadership of the school. Although their focus may be a particular program or subject area, organiza-

tions also intentionally interact with students and school staff in other ways, at times picking up projects that need staff sponsorship, such as the senior prom; fundraising for laptops and other needed equipment; and hosting events in prime organizational facilities, such as the welcome for new students and their families or celebration of school faculty.

Partnering Increases Resources for Schools

Partnering organizations consider their schools to be part of their organizational structure, and they see the success of the school and individual students as their responsibility.[9] Organizations advocate for their schools, provide development and communications services, and, when necessary, expend local and citywide political capital to get things done. They also extend organizational contacts and networks to their schools, allowing them to benefit from and utilize additional organizations. For example, Mosholu Montefiore Community Center worked with the Bronx facility of Jewish Home and Hospital (JHH) on other projects. When JHH instituted an intensive geriatrics job training program, the community center worked to ensure that its Marie Curie students comprised over a third of the students accepted into the program.

As part of the New Century initiative, each partner organization managed $400,000 in grant funds over the first four years to support the school, including the work of the organization. But in partnerships that make a differ-

ence, organizations often commit far more. They dedicate full-time staff to the initiative, open other organizational programs and facilities to students, provide benefits for students' families and school staff, and lend the use of staff time in other ways, including fundraising, advocating, and supporting development campaigns.

Partnering also creates another kind of resource, one that is perhaps less tangible than additional funds or less visible than organizational presence at borough halls, but one that nonetheless is critically valuable on a daily
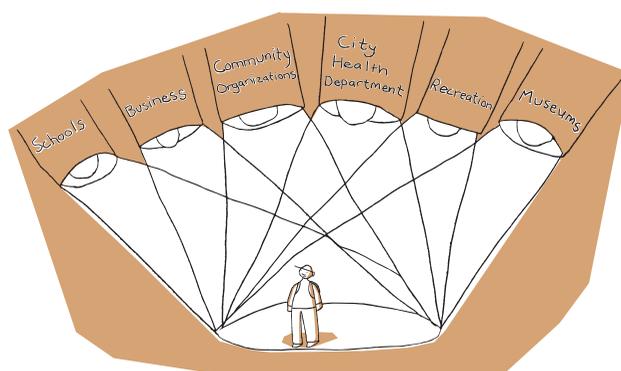
basis for students. Partnering brings additional adults into schools on a regular basis – adults who get to know the students, care deeply about them, and interact with them in a variety of ways, multiplying, diversifying, and enriching students' experiences of the world beyond their school and their neighborhood.

Going to Scale

Partnering is hard work for both school and organizational staffs. It demands a redefinition of the educational process at both individual and institutional levels and the grit to move to imple-

9 Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, East Side House Settlement, Epic Theatre Ensemble, Global Kids, Inc., and Prospect Park Alliance all list their partner school on their organizations' Web sites as one of their offered programs.

mentation. Not all partnerships succeed, and most do not operate at the high standards of the cases presented here. Some New Century partnerships have failed to develop, and many others are more akin to good vendor relationships than they are to these successful examples.

The question of whether New Century school-based partnering can "scale up" – defined as going into effect in more and more schools – has not been resolved by the experience to date of New Century schools. But if the definition of scale includes issues of depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership, as discussed by Cynthia Coburn (2003), then one might argue that the New Century partnership strategy has begun achieving scale in these five schools. Partnering in all five schools has moved beyond the relationship between principal and organizational personnel to teachers, guidance counselors, and students, altering beliefs about the nature of classroom teaching and learning – about *who* can teach *what* to *whom* successfully during the school day. Two of the five schools have moved well past the four-year period when grant funds helped support the school and partnership; in the 2007–2008 school year, some of the organizational partners spent as much as $500,000 to support their school and partnering efforts – well beyond the grant-allocated $400,000 over the initial four years of the school – an indication of the shift in reform ownership and commitment to the school as part of the organization.

Moreover, the partnering effort is spreading in deep ways. Mosholu Montefiore Community Center, a case study organization, is on its second ongoing school-based partnering effort,

and at least two of the other organizations have considered starting and partnering with other schools. In other instances, the work is moving beyond the immediate school – its staff, students, and parents – and, in a ripple effect, opening possibilities for other organizations and school staffs to broaden the reach of their resources, create new strategies for working with urban teens, and build new constituencies.

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