Right FROM THE START

The **ESSENTIAL GUIDE** to Implementing School Initiatives

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Mapping the Initiative to Your School or District

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People generally agree that when initiatives are carefully embedded in an organization, they have more of a chance of being successful. As you continue forward and begin to contemplate your initiative solution in response to identified needs, it is also time to think about how it will "attach" to your organization.

Successfully "attached" initiatives have a greater chance of predictable results, especially when compared to those that seem like "something extra." As you've seen, there are many things that threaten even the best initiative's success and impact when they reach the implementation stage. Lack of time, low priority, and failing to clearly articulate the program's alignment to the organization and its needs all stand in the way of streamlining success.

But picture the opposite. Picture an initiative that naturally resides within a school or district. It's been carefully crafted to address specific needs. The implementation is intentional because it is integrated into at least some of the efforts already happening. Making it a district priority makes good sense, because this new initiative aligns with current priorities in the school or district.

Compare that to the opposite sort of "orphan" implementation. I sometimes call this the **"B-52" model of initiative implementation.** A plane flies over your school, drops the initiative off, and heads on out to the next stop. The initiative hits the ground and its success is largely determined by chance. Will someone take an interest in running it? Will

anyone note how and where it matches or complements the current efforts? Who will make sense of this newcomer? History has suggested that B-52 implementation is rarely successful. Even worse, the initiative never receives the chance to demonstrate the positive outcomes it might bring to bear on the people it targets.

Creating initiatives that match both needs *and* organizations and bolstering their success by attaching to work already in place just makes sense. How you go about doing that, however, does depend on whether you're implementing an existing initiative or building one of your own and fully from the ground up.

Off-the-Shelf

Off-the-shelf programs and initiatives are prepackaged. Some are purchased, while others could be free and, perhaps, produced by a nonprofit or governmental agency. For example, many nonprofit groups have developed curricula that are used in schools every day. The extent to which they are developed does vary. So that's something to assess as you investigate a proposed program and determine its "fit" to your needs and organization.

I often compare attaching someone else's product to your school or district's work to getting an organ transplant. The chances of success are necessarily limited when we just grab the first lung available and quickly stitch it in. So too with initiatives.

They should directly address identified needs. Likewise, requirements for their implementation and operation should play to capabilities identified in your needs assessment. In the event you identify a high-potential initiative, it's critical to check for compatibility with identified needs and with organizational capabilities.

Ask yourself whether a potential initiative can readily integrate into your organization and be sustained over time and to the point of impact. Implementing an initiative that isn't well matched will certainly be an uphill battle. Doing the compatibility check guards against finding yourself in a suboptimal situation where implementation must be fought at every stage.

Growing Your Own

It can be a challenge to find an initiative with the right fit. That is why, after searching at length, folks sometimes choose to make their own from scratch.

This category consists of initiatives that are fully dreamed, developed, and managed by you or you and your team. This is the "starting from scratch" category, and it usually results from a need and a desire to address that need. Maybe you've looked around for an off-the-shelf solution and found nothing that fits. In fact, if you have done that, great. It shows that you are already weighing needs and considering how likely any given initiative will succeed in your unique setting. Embedding a homegrown initiative in the organization may actually be easier, compared to the off-the-shelf option. For the very reason that their design and implementation are fully under your control, these initiatives should vividly reflect your organization's needs and play to its strengths. As you design the initiative, it's important to regularly reflect back on the needs you seek to address. Likewise, knowing your strengths and leveraging them as strongholds in the design will further ensure your initiative's implementation and success. Such efforts accelerate the time to full implementation and can create an early success, which can help fuel the implementation over time.

Benefitting From Partnerships

Sometimes there isn't an off-the-shelf solution that meets your needs, and you don't have the capacity to build one from scratch. When this situation presents itself, one attractive solution is a partnership.

Partnerships have much to recommend. When developed with care and commitment, the whole can become greater than the sum of its parts. However, partnerships require considerable investments of time and resources to not only be successful but to simply operate as a coordinated whole.

The art of partnering goes beyond the scope of this initiative-focused book. However, in the spirit of exploring as well as ensuring successful partnerships, I do want to offer interested leaders some key points to consider. Tool 9 will guide you through a range of considerations to entertain as you contemplate whether you're ready to partner.

TOOL 9: PARTNER READINESS CHECKLIST

Purpose	Guide early review of an opportunity that could benefit from a partnership.
Task	Use this tool as a checklist to guide your reflection on your readiness for partnering.

DESCRIPTION AND GUIDANCE

- I believe collaboration can benefit addressing identified needs.

- I have identified and assessed community needs and have chosen to pursue a need that may be better met through collaboration.

- I have realistic expectations about what program-based collaboration will require.

- I am aware of potential partnership challenges, such as overcoming cultural differences and philosophies between our organizations.

- I have identified the contributions our organization can bring to a partnership and the constraints we face and intend to address through a partnership.

- I have identified a shortlist of partners with whom I am comfortable engaging in collaboration.

- I have a basic understanding of the prospective partners' organizations and cultures, and I believe that we can collaborate effectively.

- I feel that my partner's goals are aligned with mine and that our assets complement each other and match the community need.

DID YOU KNOW? POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS

A broad range of factors underlie successful community partnerships. They include the general areas of group cohesion (Barnes et al., 2009), partner participation (Granner & Sharpe, 2004), and partnership simplicity (Martin et al., 2005). Diving a bit deeper, six of the most cited categories into which indicators of successful partnerships can be placed are presented in the Table 12.1.

Table 12.1   Community Partnerships Success Criteria

CATEGORY	SUCCESS CRITERIA
Shared Mission and Values	Stakeholders have a clear understanding of each other's vision and values with a mutual commitment to shared goals, in the most successful partnerships (Nolan, 2011). The Education Development Center (2014) suggests that the "articulated mission and shared beliefs exist and serve as guides for the work of the partnership" (p. 9).
Well-Defined Goals and Objectives	Springing forth from the mission and vision, goals and objectives provide the next level of detail in the pursuit of defining the partnership's work. Make them clear, measurable, openly shared, and monitored throughout the duration of the partnership (Education Development Center, 2014).
Conducive Organizational Structure	Successful partnerships establish a structure that reflects the mission and goals of the collaborative arrangement. It can take the form of an affiliation agreement, legal entity, memorandum of understanding (MOU), or other less formal arrangements, such as a community coalition (Commonwealth Center for Governance Studies, Inc, 2014).
Effective Communication	Communication binds the partnership's ongoing work together. The Commonwealth Center for Governance Studies, Inc (2014), defined effective communication as a system of communication channels among partners, staff, the community, and other stakeholders, which are clear and transparent. Nolan (2011) notes success comes from communication among members, which is straightforward and based on trust and clear, simple reporting.
Synergy	Lasker et al. (2001) defined synergy as the extent to which the perspectives, resources, and skills of the participating individuals and organizations contribute to and strengthen the work of the partnership. Synergy is related to trust and has been defined using concepts such as reliability, sharing a common mission, and willingness to engage in an open conversation (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009).

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CATEGORY	SUCCESS CRITERIA
Shared Resources, Power, and Ownership	Shared resources, power, and decision-making are key to successful partnerships. These shared resources needed to reach objectives can be hard—for example, money, space, equipment, goods such as technology—and soft—for example, information, endorsements, networking connections, skills, and expertise (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Lasker et al., 2001).