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Co-laboring for a Connected Community

When School Boards and Municipalities Become Mutual Stakeholders

By: James Hopper, M.Ed.

In any community the municipal city offices and the schools tend to be the focal points of attention, and in many cases represent the largest employers. Both have elections, levy taxes, send out mass communique, plan for disaster mitigation, and both have as a priority the service to the community. Yet, oftentimes, they function independently of one another and end up duplicating efforts, despite the fact they are serving many of the same people.

This waste of time and effort can be mitigated when schools and municipalities conduct joint strategic planning sessions. Through intentional strategies created in these joint meetings, schools, municipalities, and communities can experience the benefits of more efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency.

Holistic Community Development - Through joint meetings of school boards and city councils, information can be shared regarding growth and development. The two entities can collaborate on things such as data sharing. With an MOU, they can document the sharing of costs on items that are mutually beneficial, such as a demographic study containing population projections. Common goals can be developed based on shared values and vision. Long-term sustainability is augmented by quarterly progress review.

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The Third Pillar: Collaboration Between School Districts and Cities for Community Safety

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Schools are but microcosms of their surrounding communities so it should come as no surprise that factors affecting the safety of a community also affect its local schools (and vice versa). With ongoing, repetitive coverage of active shooter events in the media, it's important for school districts (and local governments) to maintain an all-hazards, comprehensive approach to emergency preparedness and response. While horrific, school shootings are, relatively speaking, rare events, especially when compared to the likelihood of injuries and destruction resulting from hazards like dangerous weather, gas leaks, hazardous materials incidents, vehicle accidents, non-firearm violence and a myriad of others.

When describing what a comprehensive school safety and security strategy should look like, I often use an illustration of "the strategy" supported by four pillars, with each pillar being a necessary support to the overall strategy. Weakness in one pillar results in an unbalanced strategy that easily "collapses". In this illustration, the Third Pillar is comprised of Mental Health, School Climate and "Collaboratives". Collaboratives includes things like partnerships with local law enforcement agencies, fire/EMS, health departments, emergency management departments, juvenile probation, mental health agencies and others. It also includes representatives of appropriate agencies having a seat on the school district's Safety and Security Committee. These partnerships affect the effectiveness of the Fourth Pillar, which is comprised of Training, Drilling and Exercising, and which includes planning and execution of joint exercises, drills and training by school district and local government personnel. If this all sounds interrelated and intertwined, it is.

Different agencies have different tools and resources at their disposal, and collaboration amongst school districts and local government agencies is perhaps the best chance for ensuring the community as a whole has a comprehensive toolbox. Effective partnerships between school districts, cities and counties are critical to the prevention of, readiness for, and effective response to the array of dangers that can affect communities and schools. And while the thought of working out details of responsibilities, communications, interlocal agreements and MOU's may seem daunting, it all starts with dialogue and is completed the same way one would eat an elephant. One bite at a time. Bon Appetit!

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James Hopper has led Texas public schools for 16 years, focusing on innovative programs for economically disadvantaged students and English Language Learners. Emphasizing "top down" transformation, he initiated executive training and coaching, leading to a National Blue-Ribbon School and a high school recognized by US News and World Report. In 2021, he was nominated ESC Region 11 Superintendent of the Year. Hopper's visionary leadership fostered the development of Venus P-TECH, enabling students to earn degrees and certifications while in high school. He is a public speaker, community leader, and founder of local initiatives, pursuing a Ph.D. in General Psychology.



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Technology Infrastructure - The cost of upgrading technology infrastructure can sometimes be greatly affected based on the size of the project. This could possibly be accomplished with these combined efforts. The net effect would be an increase in local technology capabilities. This would also facilitate open discussions about establishing efficient and cost-effective communication pathways.

Emergency Planning – With concern for safety and security at an all-time high level, it can only serve to benefit both entities to coordinate efforts. Collaboration on emergency and security plans will better prepare all entities and streamline supply chain efforts in traumatic times. Pre-existing conditions of coordinated communication, interdepartmental dependence, data sharing, and a well-established practice of mutual respect and trust can all play a positive role in supply chain resilience in times of natural disasters (Umar & Wilson, 2021).

Optimize Resources – When the two entities share plans for expansion, it should lead to coordination of taxation efforts. This partnership could facilitate the opening of a joint school/public library. Vacant facilities for one may perfectly fit the needs of the other. Oftentimes, this isn't even known due to lack of communication (Miron, 2003).

Maximize Educational Opportunities and Workforce Readiness – This collaboration can directly affect the local economy by facilitating tailored student prep for local employment opportunities. Apprenticeships and/or internships benefiting local students and local businesses can sometimes be created. Some discussions may require including the Chamber of Commerce, 4B Foundations, or even county commissioners and other officials.

Conclusion – When the municipality and the local schools partner to become mutual stakeholders for one another it has the potential to change the entire community environment from one of apathy to one of action (Mazutis, 2024). These collaborations could result in saving a substantial amount of money, benefiting the entire community. Over time the increased transparency and visibility will create growth in trust and mutual respect, increased community pride, and the potential to garner more involvement from the community. This in turn creates increased community engagement and empowerment. The potential is in the hands of the leaders of both entities, their creative vision, and their willingness to set a distinct standard.

References Page available upon request:
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