

Partnerships that Develop *Academic Success*

By Veronica Vidal

In the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

In the already financially strapped fields of prevention, education and most other human service areas, forming partnerships has become a standard practice for achieving objectives. Identifying partners, pooling resources and forming a plan takes coordination and commitment, as in the cases of Mill Street Elementary School and the Marshall Area Youth Network.

Mill Street Elementary

In 2003, the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Act was passed, officially recognizing social and emotional development as a critical component of student academic readiness and school success. Social and emotional learning standards were developed, and schools were required to incorporate these standards into their curriculum, using their own resources. The Children’s Mental Health Act carries no funding with it.

Already ahead of the game, Mill Street Elementary School in Naperville, Ill., became a site model for the I Can Problem Solve (ICPS) program in 1995 with the help of several agencies, community-based organizations and the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization promoting evidence-based social, emotional and academic learning as an essential part of education. ICPS is a problem-solving program designed to prevent anti-social behaviors and to teach children to take others’ feelings and perspectives into account.

“When we implemented this program, we needed resources and worked with the Kane/DuPage ICPS Task Force,” explained Ruth Cross, superintendent for school services and programs K-12 in Naperville and former principal at Mill Street Elementary. The task force connected Mill Street with people who shared the same concerns regarding social and emotional health. Representatives from the DuPage County Health Department, DuPage Mental Health Association, DARE and community-based organizations such as Naperville Community Outreach Youth & Family Services and Breaking Free make up the partnership – each providing additional services students need.

“Their partnerships are very helpful for us, especially if we have students whose families are going through transitions. There are several avenues that we can refer to if there’s anything that might be outside our academic realm,” said Tanya Hughes, assistant principal at Mill Street.

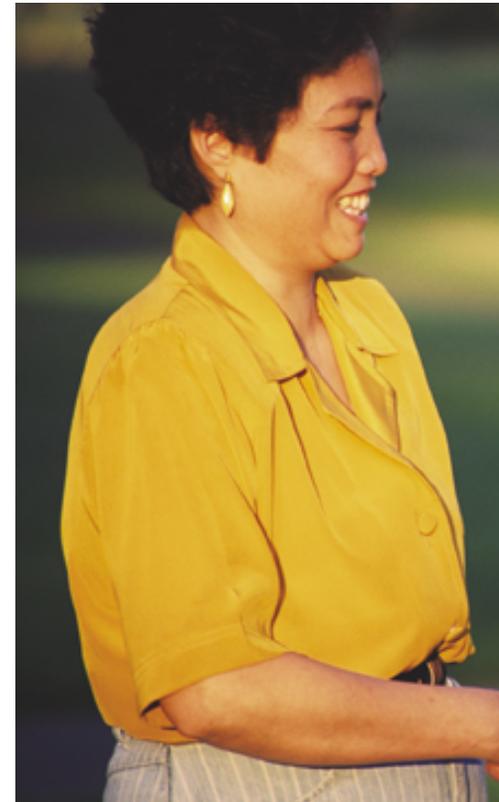
From a financial perspective, partnerships have the advantage of pooling financial resources and presenting a stronger case for grants. Mill Street, through its partnerships, gained \$3,500 for training and materials and another \$19,000 from the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority to develop the ICPS parent component, which Naperville Community Outreach provides through workshops.

Despite their success, partnerships require assessment to ensure that projects remain on track and objectives are being met. With the help of CASEL, the school has re-evaluated the effectiveness of the I Can Problem Solve program and is currently considering other social and emotional learning programs to implement.

CASEL offers implementation and sustainability processes specific to social and emotional learning programs, but most steps can apply to any partnership (see box). For Hughes, the keys to sustaining a successful partnership require:

- An ongoing assessment to identify and address problem areas early.
- Allocating resources for ongoing professional development to maintain and improve delivery of services.
- Keeping parents informed and involved in the partnership project.

She also maintains, “A school cannot operate in isolation. Schools really need to make sure that if they are going to look at the whole child, there has to be more than just school personnel towing the load. It’s nice to have the partnerships.”



Marshall Area Youth Network

Aiming to bring families and communities together, the Marshall Area Youth Network (MAYN) began 12 years ago with a small group of people collaborating to provide family activities such as free swimming, golf and church services in the town of Marshall in southeastern Illinois.



Today, MAYN is an organization promoting strong family units, supporting school efforts and reaching more than 500 students a year through tutor and mentoring programs developed to facilitate positive youth development.

Barbara Gard, director for MAYN, explained that the network provides local activities and six ongoing pro-

grams helping students increase academic performance, improve self-esteem and prevent substance abuse. “We have very good relationships with our schools. I’m in them almost daily,” she pointed out.

Working with the Marshall North and South Elementary schools and Marshall Junior and Senior High schools, MAYN has implemented the Lunch Buddy program, allowing mentors to meet with students during lunchtime at school twice a month. The Boys Are Cool and Girls Are Powerful programs help 5th- and 6th-grade students build a strong self-image and stress the importance of making positive life choices. Also, MAYN’s connections with local businesses allow junior high and high school students in the Career Mentors program to visit their mentors’ places of employment to gain a sense of the working world and explore career options.

It’s no surprise that MAYN has grown to include so many programs; the network has 28 partners representing all levels of education, the ministry and the fields of health, prevention and law enforcement. Most have signed memorandums

of understanding or partnership agreements. The Clark County health, probation and sheriff’s departments, Human Resource Center and the University of Illinois Extension are among some of the partners who offer their services, give presentations to students, recommend mentors and serve on MAYN’s committee.

“Obviously, they are a good resource for me,” said Gard. “If I have a teacher, principal or parent call, I know someone at Human Resource Center and in law enforcement. I know clergy and an extension advocator. It just gives me a great pool to go to if someone comes to me and recognizes a problem.”

Having a strong backing from all of these partners also helped MAYN communicate their efforts to fund raise. “As I write grants, the memorandums of understanding are very important, especially when I can show how many different entities are involved with MAYN,” Gard said. It has received grants for anti-tobacco education, violence prevention and strategic planning. It became a United Way agency in 2002.

Gard attributes MAYN’s success to everyone’s time and devotion and just a bit of luck: “I think the fact that you have volunteers, mentors and committee members who have been through the long haul says a lot for the program.” MAYN is currently updating its strategic plan, making sure its energy is still focused on its goals and making adjustments where needed. According to Gard, “The whole reason this operates so well is because of these partnerships and people who are so devoted to it. You have to have everybody on board to make it work and to understand what you want to accomplish. It’s the factor that keeps your group alive.”

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Implementation Process

1. Principal commits to school-wide SEL.
2. Engage stakeholders and form steering committee.
3. Develop and articulate shared vision.
4. Conduct needs and resources assessment.
5. Develop action plan.
6. Select evidence-based program.
7. Conduct initial staff development.
8. Launch SEL instruction in classrooms.
9. Expand instruction and integrate SEL school-wide.
10. Continue cycle of implementing and improving.

SEL Sustainability Process

1. Provide ongoing professional development.
2. Monitor and evaluate for continuous improvement.
3. Develop infrastructure to support SEL.
4. Integrate SEL framework school-wide.
5. Nurture partnerships with families and communities.
6. Communicate with stakeholders (marketing).

Vidal is the Communications Specialist for Prevention First.