

**UC Berkeley**  
**IURD Working Paper Series**

**Title**

Characteristics of Successful Civic Partnerships: Lessons for Building a Children's Agenda

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ng617h2>

**Author**

Fischler, Raphael

**Publication Date**

1989-05-01



**Working Paper 89-17**

**Characteristics of  
Successful Civic  
Partnerships: Lessons for  
Building a Children's  
Agenda**

Raphael Fischler

May 1989

University of California at Berkeley

\$5.00

**Working Paper 89-17**

(formerly Working Paper 012)

**Characteristics of Successful Civic Partnerships:  
Lessons for Building a Children's Agenda**

Raphael Fischler



The University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum is a partnership of the University of California at Berkeley; California State University, Hayward; Mills College; Holy Names College; the Peralta Community College District; and the Oakland community.

University of California at Berkeley  
Institute of Urban and Regional Development

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

---

Introduction	1
Ten Critical Factors	2
References	9

## **Introduction**

This paper forms a bridge between Linda M. Gardner's paper on public-private partnerships in general (Oakland Forum Working Paper No. 001) and future work on civic organizations working specifically for children and youth. This round of research therefore deals with a broad array of civic coalitions, a significant portion of which work on youth and education matters.

The purpose of this paper is to give the Panel on Youth and Education of the University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum recommendations for the creation of an effective organization to improve the condition of children in Oakland. This preliminary research has yielded a set of ten features that seem to characterize successful organizations of the type in view. Whether all these qualities are truly causes of success, and not its products, is an open question, but it is clear that a successful organization is one that learns and improves itself as it proceeds.

Participants in civic alliances and researchers who have studied them seem to agree on the following ten features as being characteristic of successful partnerships:

1. Strong leadership
2. Active participation from the highest levels of the member organizations
3. Membership of all key parties
4. Broad-based community support and input
5. Sustained communication and networking
6. Effective institutionalization of the civic Partnership
7. Strategic planning
8. Targeted programs and projects
9. Use of media and promotion
10. A small but high-caliber full-time Professional paid staff.

## **1. Strong Leadership**

Perhaps the single most frequently mentioned recommendation in the literature on civic alliances is the choice of leaders who are effective at motivating people, organizing collective efforts, and implementing plans. Very often, leaders will be self-appointed, insofar as they will have initiated the alliance themselves, out of a sense of mission. As Byrd L. Jones and Robert W. Maloy argue: "Few partnerships have flourished without dedicated leaders" (Jones and Maloy, 1988:15). Leaders must be prominent members of the community; they should be high-level decision-makers who can mobilize people and resources and can enforce their commitments.

In an interview by former Forum staff member Kristin Palmquist, officials of KidsPlace (Seattle) declared that dedication and strong leadership of civic leaders (in particular Dr. Bob Aldrich, as well as the mayor himself) had been crucial for the success of the endeavor. Strong leadership is essential not only for mobilization and implementation, but also for developing consensus, solving conflicts, achieving coordination, and ensuring future leadership.

## **2. Active Participation From The Highest Levels Of The Member Organizations**

If leaders are to be effective at implementing decisions and plans, they must have the institutional authority to commit resources. When the business community is part of an alliance, only CEOs (or other top-level managers, eventually) can speak for their firms and bring them to action without extensive negotiations. Likewise, "commitment ... from the superintendent in the school system is essential for a successful partnership" involving the schools (Committee for Economic Development, 1985:92). In an interview with Kristin Palmquist, Alan Weisberg, former executive director of the Oakland Alliance, attributed the relative decline of the organization in part to the change of superintendent in Oakland and to the fact that the new superintendent did not participate as actively in the Alliance as did his predecessor. Reduced support from the school district in turn accounted for the withdrawal of other key players.

Direct participation of the mayor is an inestimable plus for civic alliances, as witnessed in Seattle (KidsPlace) and Atlanta (The Atlanta Partnership of Business and Education), among other places. Commitment of the mayor is particularly important for the integration of the partnership into the political process. (On the other hand, involvement of an elected official can expose an alliance to unhealthy

political controversy.) In general, the presence of top-level members of participating organizations is a condition for the long-term institutionalization of the partnership. (See point 6.)

### **3. Membership Of All Key Parties**

Success follows not only from the direct involvement of "movers and shakers" but also from the participation of all parties on which implementation depends. Does the partnership aim at providing jobs for youngsters?--It will have to include, from the earliest stage of development, those who can provide these jobs, namely business leaders. Does it want to achieve change in the school system?--Collaboration of the school district and of teacher associations will be needed from the start. Is its purpose to coordinate public and non-profit services to children and families?--These will have to be part of the organizational structure as soon as possible. A broad coalition will also provide wide-ranging expertise and offer many avenues to community support.

Not only do key parties need to be involved, they must also reach consensus on goals and objectives. Moreover, they need to join forces in a process that fosters coalition-building and interdependence. Byrd L. Jones and Robert W. Maloy (Jones and Maloy, 1988) see as the first step in the organization of a partnership (in this case, around schools) a process of "initiation." This first phase includes, among other actions: building agreements about problems and their priority; clarifying self-interests as perceived by each organization and key participants; recognizing the different constraints and strengths of each organization and its subsystems; and making sure that each side puts something of value to it on the table so that benefits look probable and defection is not costless.

### **4. Broad-based Support And Input**

"The effectiveness of [civic alliances] depends heavily on the public's belief that they support positions in the general public interest" (Committee for Economic Development, 1982:21). Such organizations, whose wish is to effect general and widespread changes in a community, must give the latter a sense of ownership in the effort and its results. The "civic foundations" of alliance-building are therefore crucial: "The more complex the operating partnership, ... the more important the civic foundations of that process" (C.E.D., 1982:2). These foundations include, among other factors: (1) a civic culture that fosters a sense of community and

encourages citizen participation rooted in practical concern for the community, and (2) a commonly accepted vision of the community that recognizes its strengths and weaknesses and involves key groups in the process of identifying what the community can become.

If broad-based support is a condition for social change, community input is also required to secure that support. Goals for Dallas, a city-wide partnerships born in the Sixties, started its work with an analysis of the situation at that time, with a goal-setting conference of civic leaders, and especially with community feedback on both analysis and goals through neighborhood meetings. A second round of neighborhood meetings provided feedback on proposals for action made by the various task-forces of the organization. This kind of participation and support, as well as a smooth and efficient collaboration of all interested parties, requires good communication.

## **5. Sustained Communication And Networking**

For Susan D. Otterbourg and Michael Timpane, two of the most important problem areas in partnerships are those of coordination and of the maintenance of momentum. Both require "a consistently high level of communication" and frequent interaction among all program participants (Davis, 1986: 68). Partnerships must also be able to use information and expertise from other organizations and agencies in their field, or even to collaborate with them in joint projects. They must, of course, also secure political and financial support. All this requires constant networking, the creation and maintenance of linkages and cross-linkages. "At their best, ... partnerships establish a process as well as a program. They foster substantive long-term relationships and cooperative efforts that involve [all parties] in an effort to define problems, establish goals, and develop sound strategies" (Committee for Economic Development, 1987:66).

Some civic alliances have been created for the explicit purpose of coordinating the actions of other organizations. The Atlanta Partnership of Business and Education, for instance, has a four-fold function: (1) securing contact between schools and businesses (or colleges); (2) keeping interested organizations and individuals informed; (3) disseminating information in order to prevent duplication and gaps in service delivery; and (4) offering advice through a 24-hour, 365-day answering service. The Chicago Project was the initiative of a group of corporate leaders who wished to develop a better process of communication and cooperation for civic action. The 1986 report that underlay the Project's creation stated: "Civic organizations [in Chicago] share a common mission of promoting ...



interaction. However, their power is diminished because they have not developed a process for communicating among themselves and with the public sector nor a process for working together successfully" (The Chicago Project, 1986:3). Civic alliances should therefore develop an effective information and communication system to insure mutual understanding, coalition-building, and public information.

## **6. Effective Institutionalization Of The Civic Partnership**

For Professor Byrd L. Jones, "effective partnerships generate activities and discussions that promote organizational change while fostering new attitudes and behaviors among the participants" (private communication). A change in attitudes and behaviors is perhaps the most important achievement of a partnership. Not only does the collaboration of different organizations require that each abandon some of its beliefs and modes of operations for the sake of true interaction and collaboration, but the complex social problems that civic alliances address often require a re-shaping of community values. More practically, a successful partnership or alliance is one that manages to establish itself as a permanent player in the institutional system of the city. For that purpose, it must affect the organizational structure of relevant parties. Thus, while individual members of partnerships must be the top-level officials of the institutions they represent, these institutions themselves must adapt their daily procedures and general policies to their participation in the alliance. For example, a private firm may allow employees to teach in public schools during paid company time, or City Hall may create an advisory body whose members are drawn from the executive committee of a civic alliance. The latter idea was actually implemented in Seattle, where the mayor's political commitment to KidsPlace was institutionalized in the form of a "Commission on Children and Youth" and through a "KidsBoard"--a committee of youths that is an official advisory body to the mayor. The Atlanta Partnership of Business and Education, on the other hand, has established a separate task-force for the specific purpose of long-term institutionalization.

A successful partnership or alliance is also an organization that ensures, in the words of Kathryn Wylde, "a continuity of commitment and support that survives the tenure of individuals" (Davis, 1986:120). Institutionalization therefore concerns not only the creation of official programs and committees and a lasting change in the culture of participating institutions, if not in the culture of the city as a whole; it also involves the establishment of secure funding. The latter is a function of long-term financial commitment by funding institutions, but also of the variety of sources of revenue, a variety which provides flexibility in the face of financial adversity.

## **7. Strategic Planning**

The need to develop strategic action plans is mentioned repeatedly in the surveyed literature. As often described, the planning process starts with a formulation of problems and an assessment of needs, and with a definition of goals and objectives. It goes on with an analysis of resources (those of the partnership itself and those of the city as a whole, e.g. existing services and programs) and with an allocation of responsibilities and resources with respect to goals and objectives. It then proceeds with a development of action schedules and of systems of monitoring and evaluation.

Many authors stress the fact that defining and prioritizing goals and objectives is key to a successful partnership. Policy goals should be unambiguous, constitute a coherent agenda, and reflect a consensus among all members of the alliance; program objectives should be clearly stated, realistic, and attainable (as well as measurable); and monitoring and evaluation should be an integral part of the implementation process. After having determined goals and objectives, Goals for Dallas established task forces on each point of action. These designed schedules that specified target dates for the completion of each major step and indicated organizational responsibilities for each step. After getting feedback on these proposals from the community through a series of neighborhood meetings, the task forces revised the schedules and set up "Goal Achievement Committees" to document the progress made toward each goal and to report regularly to the whole community.

## **8. Targeted Programs And Projects**

With their calls for strategic planning, many authors and organizers emphasize the value of endeavors that are specific, limited, and measurable. The first reason for this is the above-mentioned need to monitor and evaluate the activities of the partnership; this evaluation is made easier, if not at all possible, by objectives that offer tangible evidence of success. A second reason is the need to secure commitment from members of the partnership. Besides communication and the maintenance of momentum, Susan D. Otterbourg and Michael Timpane mention participants' expectations and the maintenance of commitment as two of the most important problem areas in partnerships (Davis, 1986). Unrealistic expectations, which can be very damaging to the alliance in the long run, are kept under control by making people work on specific and tangible projects. On the other hand, there is perhaps no better way to give members a sense of ownership

over the alliance than by offering them a stake in specific projects at the first stages of activity. Their commitment will be secured by early involvement, especially if they receive explicit recognition for their work. Early action projects will also facilitate team-building and communication among participants.

A third and final reason for developing narrowly targeted projects early on lies in the need for alliances to continuously build support. This is best done by showing concrete evidence of success, even if in narrow areas. Pilot projects can serve that purpose. Support from the community will also be triggered by public events. Leaders of KidsPlace in Seattle not only kept commitment and enthusiasm high by means of numerous short-run projects, they also organized high-visibility events that drew the community's attention to children's issues. These events, for example annual festive KidsDays or full-fledged youth press conferences, showed kids and youths that they matter to the whole community.

## **9. Media And Promotion**

Creating and enlarging community support for a civic partnership requires, among other things, a continuous use of public media. It can be useful, for that purpose, to make selected media representatives direct participants in the partnership. This will ensure not only more coverage of the alliance's activities, but also more knowledgeable and accurate reporting. (On the other hand, media organizations are also corporate citizens with a stake in the community and their active participation in a partnerships is often warranted from that point of view.) Frequent contacts with the media, through press releases, news articles, or even press conferences, will help diffuse the alliance's agenda and advertise its achievements.

Media specifically developed by the partnership (e.g., a newsletter) are valuable tools of communication among its members. Still, frequent direct interaction between individuals is of inestimable value for the well-being of the partnership and cannot be replaced by indirect means of communication. Also, as mentioned under point 5, different types of media can help foster collaboration among various parties by allowing for the exchange of relevant information, expertise, and logistical support.

## **10. A Small But High-caliber Full-time Professional Paid Staff**

The Committee for Economic Development writes: "A successful business-civic organization is usually supported by a small but high-caliber full-time professional staff that assists in narrowing and defining priorities, researching issues, planning for implementation, establishing and maintaining contacts with key community groups and leaders, and coordinating implementation of projects" (C.E.D., 1982:17). The proper function of the staff will, of course, vary with each partnership and alliance. Some will require a more passive staff that merely provides logistical support, while others will put it in charge of monitoring and evaluation, even of implementation itself.

Most authors consulted do insist on the fact that an efficient staff is important for the creation and maintenance of an effective information and communication system--a system that is crucial to ensure mutual understanding, coalition-building, and public information. Most also stress that the staff should communicate with professional counterparts in government and other community organizations. Michael R. Williams (Williams, 1989), addressing the specific issue of neighborhood coalitions for urban school reform, calls for the presence of paid staff with "sophisticated modes of operation." These include, among others, in-depth research, lobbying, negotiating, policy-making and plan-making, and monitoring and evaluating of government programs and grants. In general, the staff must be an effective facilitator and coordinator.

## References

The Achievement Council, Planning Committee, 1984. "Achievement for Whom?" (Oakland: The Achievement Council. Inc.).

\_\_\_\_\_, 1987. "The Achievement Council School Initiative: A Collaborative Effort to Raise Achievement in Six Clusters of Predominantly Minority Schools; Report on Year One" (Oakland: The Achievement Council).

The Atlanta Partnership of Business and Education, 1987. "A Community of Believers" and selected brochures (Atlanta: Atlanta Partnership of Business and Education, Inc.).

Beachler, Judith A., 1981. "The Community Education Project: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," paper presented at the Annual Conference on Community Services and Continuing Education, Seattle, October 11-14, 1981.

Boylan, Hunter S., ed., 1982. *Forging New Partnerships in Learning Assistance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1982).

Brooks, Harvey, Lance Liebman, and Corinne S. Schelling, eds., 1984. *Public-Private Partnerships: New Opportunities for Meeting Social Needs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing Co.).

The Chicago Project, 1986. "The Chicago Project: A Report on Civic Life in Chicago" (Chicago: The Chicago Project).

Committee for Economic Development, Research and Policy Committee, 1982. *Public-Private Partnerships: An Opportunity for Urban Communities* (New York and Washington, DC: C.E.D.).

\_\_\_\_\_, 1985. *Investing In Our Children: Business and The Public Schools* (New York and Washington, DC: C.E.D.).

\_\_\_\_\_, 1987. *Children in Need: Investment Strategies For The Educationally Disadvantaged* (New York and Washington, DC: C.E.D.).

Davis, Perry, ed., 1986. *Public-Private Partnerships: Improving Urban Life* (N.Y.: The Academy of Political Science).

Fosler, R. Scott, and Renee A. Berger, eds., 1982. *Public-Private Partnerships in American Cities: Seven Case Studies* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co.).

Gardner, Linda M., 1987. "Public-Private Partnerships: A Survey of the Field, An Opportunity for the East Bay" Working Paper No. 1, University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum (Berkeley: Institute of Urban and Regional Development, U.C. Berkeley).

Hahn, Andrew B. and Paul Aaron, 1988. "Business Goes To School" *Social Policy* Winter 1988: 32-36.

Jones, Byrd L. and Robert W. Maloy, 1986. "Collaborations and Ill-Structured Problems of School Improvement" *Planning and Changing* Vol.17, No. 1 (Spring 1986): 3-8.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1988. *Partnerships For Improving Schools* (New York and Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press).

Leftwich, C. W. and Yih Nan Lee, 1986. "School/Community Relations: A Building Approach," *Planning and Changing* Vol. XVII, No. 2 (Summer 1986): 101-105.

Maeroff, Gene I., 1983. *School and College: Partnerships in Education* (Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching).

Spikes, W. Franklin, ed., 1980. *The University and the Inner City: A Redefinition of Relationships* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co.).

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Youth Programs, 1980. "Work-Education Councils--The Collaborative Approach," Youth Knowledge Development Report 12.5 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office).

Williams, Michael R., 1989. *Neighborhood Organizing for Urban School Reform* (N.Y.: Teachers College Press).