PROSPER Community–University Partnership Model for Public Education Systems: Capacity-Building for Evidence-Based, Competence-Building Prevention

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This paper presents a model to guide capacity-building in state public education systems for delivery of evidence-based family and youth interventions—interventions that are designed to bolster youth competencies, learning, and positive development overall. Central to this effort is a linking capacity agents framework that builds upon longstanding state public education infrastructures, and a partnership model called PROSPER or PROmoting School–community–university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience. The paper presents an overview of the evolving partnership model and summarizes positive results of its implementation over a 12-year period in an ongoing project.

KEY WORDS: partnership; capacity-building; diffusion; evidence-based intervention; family and youth.

M. Scott Peck opens his Road Less Traveled with a simple statement: “Life is difficult.” Were he writing a book on prevention science, he might well have stated: “Applying prevention science to practice is quite difficult.” This paper begins with the premise that there is inadequate infrastructure and capacity for diffusion of evidence-based prevention programs and practices; it suggests one approach to a prevention science-to-practice road that could be “more traveled.” Essentially, it describes a framework for enhancing the capacity of state and local public education systems to support student competence building, learning, and development through community–university partnerships. Central to this framework is a model for linking capacity-related agents within various segments of state public education systems, including state universities and their Extension systems, with the purpose of sustained, quality implementation of evidence-based interventions for both students and their families.

THE NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINABLE INTERVENTION DELIVERY

A number of researchers have lamented the dearth of literature on effective methods and supportive infrastructures for sustaining quality implementation of preventive and competence-building interventions (see Altman, 1995; Elias & Clabby, 1992; Morrissey et al., 1997; Wandersman et al., 1998). Too frequently, efficacious interventions implemented in schools and communities through grant funding fail to survive the withdrawal of that funding (Adelman & Taylor, 2003). A chief reason for the limited sustainability of interventions begun by research projects may be that successful implementation of the project does not necessarily require building the local ownership and capacity required for the institutionalization of interventions (e.g., adequate personnel with appropriate leadership capabilities and other requisite skills, as well as reliable sources of funding—see Lerner, 1995; Lerner & Simon, 1998). Even when evidence-based interventions are introduced into

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A key reason for advocating for partnerships among schools, universities, and communities is that they can build upon previously developed public education infrastructures for the provision of training, technical assistance, and other resources used to enhance capacity for sustained implementation of evidence-based programs. These infrastructures include the Extension System based in land-grant universities and the public school technical assistance and programming support funded by the U.S. Department of Education. As noted by Huberman and Miles: “Large-scale, change-bearing innovations lived or died by the amount and quality of assistance that their users received once the change process was underway” (1984, p. 273). The partnerships described in the next section build upon those infrastructures and incorporate elements of various sustainability strategies recommended in the literature.

FRAMEWORK FOR LINKING CAPACITY AGENTS IN STATE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The need for capacity enhancement directed toward community-based diffusion of evidence-based interventions is emphasized in relevant literature (e.g., Arthur et al., in press; Goodman, 2000), particularly that concerning school-based interventions (e.g., Gottfredson & Wilson, 2003; Hallfors, 2001). Herein, capacity-building will be defined as efforts designed to enhance and coordinate human, technical, financial, and other organizational resources directed toward meeting implementation of evidence-based, competence-building interventions through public education delivery systems. Human resources include time, knowledge, and skills directed toward intervention objectives and the provision of skilled technical assistance. Technical resources include equipment, access to databases, data management, and materials required to implement and evaluate interventions. Other organizational resources include space and facilities, leadership support, and organization policy-making efforts that support sustained intervention implementation.

In his discussions of the roles of organizational change agents, Rogers (1995) describes a change agent linking function that entails connecting “resource systems” with “clients” of those resource systems. This linking concept is central to the framework presented herein. Rogers’ linking agent idea is, however, elaborated. That is, we emphasize the related, systems-level function of building and sustaining capacity through coordinated efforts of agents serving different but interrelated roles in public education systems. In other words, we posit an essential function of linking internal capacity-building and sustaining agents within a public school system with external agents who share intervention goals and provide resources to implement and evaluate interventions. External resource agents are those from agencies “outside” of public schools, both within the state public education system—the state university, state department of education, and area education agencies—and in the local community (e.g., human service providers). These external agents generate, coordinate, and provide intervention training, technical assistance, evaluation, and other resources. Linking to external resource agents facilitates connections with a continuum of interventions that may benefit youth and families, ranging from preventive interventions (e.g., competence building to prevent substance abuse), to early interventions (i.e., early in the development of problem behaviors), to treatment for severe or chronic problems (e.g., family preservation). An internal capacity agent in a public school builds, coordinates, and sustains resources within that organization for the “clients” of evidence-based interventions—in this case, students in public schools and their family members—with the idea that such agents build capacity on an ongoing basis. Such capacity-building can include generation of resources necessary to meet accountability requirements (e.g., resources for programming designed to reduce barriers to learning that otherwise impede student academic performance—see Adelman & Taylor, 2003). See Fig. 1 for a graphic representation of the linking capacity agents framework.

The linking agents in our framework are from the state university Extension system (currently described by the USDA as the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service). This system provides agents located in communities throughout every state who can link schools’ internal capacity-builders and sustainers with their external resource providers, as a part of their routine work. These linking agents provide both local or horizontal linkages (e.g., internal or school-based agents with external representatives of community agencies)