

The Role of the Neutral Facilitator

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Preface

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) exists to challenge, support, and enrich educational systems in providing quality education for all learners, enabling them to lead productive and fulfilling lives in an ever-changing, increasingly interconnected world. A private, non-profit corporation, SEDL has served for more than 29 years as a federally-designated Regional Educational Laboratory (REL). SEDL's current REL operations serve the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. The REL operates with funds from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. SEDL provides training and technical assistance, creates and fosters educational networks, conducts applied research studies, and produces research- and practice-based materials.

This volume is the second in a series of booklets developed by SEDL's Home, School, and Community Partnerships (HSCP) Project. It describes the role of the neutral facilitator in building HSC Partnerships. The first booklet in this series, *Building Home, School, and Community Partnerships: The Planning Phase*, describes the stages of HSC Partnership development during the planning phase. A third booklet, *Charting Progress toward Collaboration*, describes how five demonstration sites in the Southwestern Region tracked progress while participating in the planning phase. The HSCP Project also produces an annual *Directory of Home, School, and Community Partnership Programs* and participates in networking activities to advance collaboration at the state and local levels.

“Leaders from partner organizations may experience difficulty in sharing power, but collaboratives will fail unless partners willingly cultivate a new style of leadership—partnership among equals.”
(Melaville, et al., 1993)

Introduction

Since 1991, staff from SEDL’s Home School, and Community Partnership (HSCP) Project have supported the development of demonstration sites in the five states of the Southwestern region. These five states are Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Each demonstration site participated in the planning phase of a partnership involving representatives of the *home* (parents and other family members), *school* (teachers, school administrators, and other educators), and *community* (health and social service providers, business representatives, and other community members). For more information on the planning phase of HSC Partnership development, see SEDL’s publication, *Building Home, School, and Community Partnerships: The Planning Phase*.

The demonstration sites were unique in their use of SEDL staff as neutral facilitators during the planning phase of HSC Partnership development. Each site received long-term, ongoing technical assistance ranging from a period of at least several months to a number of years. This booklet shares lessons learned from SEDL’s experiences at the sites. It describes the context for using a neutral facilitator and answers key questions about the neutral facilitator’s role, including:

- What is a neutral facilitator?
- Why do HSC Partnerships need a neutral facilitator?

- What characteristics and skills does a neutral facilitator need to possess?
- What are the benefits of using a neutral facilitator?
- What strategies can a neutral facilitator use to assist HSC Partnerships?

Research acknowledges the need for a planning phase early in the development of a collaborative partnership (Kagan, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). This planning phase is frequently referred to as the “formation stage”; and its activities are referred to as “preformation activities.” Kagan (1991) describes the formation stage of collaboration as one that shapes all future stages. Kagan suggests that a group must successfully pass through these initial stages of a collaborative partnership before it will be ready to implement its program.

A body of literature defines and discusses collaboration in the context of improving the delivery of education and human services to children and families. Mattessich and Monsey (1992) provide the following working definition:

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to: a definition of mutual relationships and goals, a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility, mutual authority and accountability for success, and sharing of resources and rewards.

SEDL's field experience suggests that if collaboration is the aim of a partnership, then the group must invest time, energy, and effort to develop the skills and relationships necessary to work collaboratively. SEDL staff have outlined four necessary stages of the planning phase. HSC Partnerships must pass through all four stages to develop these skills and relationships. This field experience demonstrates that a neutral facilitator often helps to ensure that the partners successfully pass through the planning phase and begin to collaborate effectively.

What is a neutral facilitator?

The term *neutral facilitator* refers to a person—usually one who is highly skilled in working with groups—who helps the group address specific needs. The neutral facilitator's involvement lasts at least several months, as the HSC Partnership undertakes its planning phase. In SEDL's experience, a neutral facilitator greatly enhances an HSC Partnership's ability to complete the planning phase successfully and with greater ease.

The three primary goals of the neutral facilitator during the HSC Partnership planning phase are:

- to help a diverse group of individuals become a partnership that can work collaboratively;
- to identify partners' common concerns about children and families and develop collaborative efforts to address those concerns; and

- to build and strengthen leadership so that partners share responsibilities when they carry out their collaborative efforts.

As the word “neutral” implies, the facilitator aims to be unbiased in his/her work with an HSC Partnership. Although neutral facilitators work closely with the HSC Partnership, they are not a members of the partnerships. The neutral facilitator aims to find avenues that bring the partnership’s ideas to life in positive ways so that the products and outcomes of the planning phase truly reflect the partnership’s work together.

Why do HSC Partnerships need a neutral facilitator?

There are three primary reasons why HSC Partnerships need a neutral facilitator during the planning phase of HSC Partnership development. They are: 1) to help members deal with and ultimately welcome the partnership’s diversity, 2) to help diffuse divergent viewpoints and sometimes highly charged emotions, and 3) to help partnerships maneuver successfully through the four stages of the planning phase.

Dealing with Diversity. HSC Partnerships are unique because of their diverse membership and involvement of people who traditionally have not worked together. The neutral facilitator helps partners feel comfortable with and, indeed, welcome this diversity. Because of their diverse backgrounds and experiences, members often have varying levels of knowledge and skill in a number of areas (for example, familiarity with group process, leadership experience, and writing skills). The neutral facilitator works with all partners to ensure

that their varied level of skills does not interfere with their need and ability to work together.

Diffusing Highly Charged Emotions. Diverse groups are frequently highly charged with emotion. For example, passion often permeates an HSC Partnership's discussion about the issues facing the community and how these issues have been addressed—and not addressed—in the past. Individuals often react defensively in response to perceived criticisms or judgments about current services, educational programs, and/or parenting skills.

A neutral facilitator guides the interpersonal dynamics that diversity and historical differences can impact within the HSC Partnership. The facilitator aims to harness this raw energy and use it for productive action. Sorting productively through the mire of real and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the community takes enormous skill and sensitivity. The neutral facilitator can make important contributions to this process.

Maneuvering Successfully through the Planning Phase. The planning phase is a complex undertaking and is more likely to be effective when HSC Partnerships involve a neutral facilitator. The neutral facilitator can ensure that the partnership addresses each of the four stages of HSC Partnership development. The neutral facilitator also can help HSC Partnerships to build from and connect one stage to another as they prepare to collaborate.

Thus a neutral facilitator provides valuable assistance to developing HSC Partnerships. A neutral facilitator can be most

useful to an HSC Partnership when it is:

- undertaking new, community-wide projects involving diverse partners who have not worked together in the past;
- interested in changing the ways that families, school staff, human service providers, business leaders, and other community representatives have traditionally worked together; and
- finding that historical differences and past experiences are impeding new collaborative efforts.

What characteristics and skills must a neutral facilitator possess?

The neutral facilitator takes on a very visible role within the partnership. She/he is out in front of the group, gathering information from members, and helping them sort through the issues, then move to action. At the same time, the neutral facilitator tunes in to the subtle—and not so subtle—reactions of individuals to the content and direction of meetings. The neutral facilitator balances attention to partners' interpersonal dynamics and growth with activities that are designed to ensure that meetings flow with purpose and direction. Therefore, the neutral facilitator must be able to demonstrate many characteristics and skills, including:

- Openness to and acceptance of diverse perspectives
- Excellent listening skills
- Strong organizational skills

- Effective writing and summarizing skills
- Skill in using activities that appeal to diverse individuals with a variety of learning styles and preferences
- Skill in strengthening the group's communication skills in ways that are sensitive to members' history of working together, interpersonal dynamics, and backgrounds
- Ability to connect diverse opinions in ways that promote consensus and collaborative problem solving.

Clearly, there are very few individuals who possess strong skills in all these areas. SEDL used a team approach that involved two staff members as neutral facilitators working together at each demonstration site. A team approach allowed the neutral facilitators to support each other and share the work load. It also enabled the neutral facilitators to observe and share insights about the interpersonal dynamics that influenced the group's progress.

What are the benefits of using a neutral facilitator?

During the planning phase, a neutral facilitator offers many benefits that strengthen an HSC Partnership as it prepares to collaborate. These include the following:

Creates a positive environment within the HSC Partnership so that trust grows. The neutral facilitator welcomes all partners and finds ways to help them feel that they are an integral part of the group. The

neutral facilitator also models effective interaction and the importance of listening to all perspectives. This kind of modeling sets a positive, respectful tone and approach which, in turn, results in positive group interaction. By conveying openness to and acceptance of diverse opinions, the neutral facilitator creates a comfortable environment for all partners. Partners are then willing to take risks in expressing their hopes for and concerns about children and families. Linking the discussion to common concerns about children and families keeps discussion positive and oriented toward building a collaborative approach. By weaving common threads among the many perspectives of different partners, the neutral facilitator helps them see and value their similarities.

Helps the HSC Partnership deal with conflict. When change is undertaken, conflicts often arise. These conflicts are normal and offer insights into what is important to partners. When conflicts arise, the neutral facilitator helps partners identify the feelings and values that lie behind disagreements. The neutral facilitator works with partners to keep dialogue open and to resolve conflicts. The neutral facilitator also observes and gives the partnership feedback about how group dynamics are influencing its work. The neutral facilitator introduces activities to help the partnership address problems in group dynamics. The neutral facilitator also raises issues that partners are not comfortable raising or may have overlooked, because of their individual perspectives on home, school, or community concerns.

Suspends traditional roles and influences. Old patterns of power and politics can have a tremendous influence on the partnership's work. The planning phase is designed to help

partners change the ways that they have worked together in the past. The neutral facilitator provides leadership for the group so that partners must set aside the roles that they traditionally play in the community. This approach welcomes the involvement of all partners, and ensures that no individual, agency, or organization is allowed to dictate or direct the outcomes of the HSC Partnership. As a result, all partners have greater freedom to fully participate in, but not control, the partnership.

Nurtures the development of new roles. The neutral facilitator supports the development of a wide range of new roles for partners. Parents frequently emerge from HSC Partnerships in leadership roles that they never imagined for themselves. Administrators emerge with new visions about how to involve staff in meaningful shared decision making. Teachers see themselves as integral members of teams addressing a wide range of concerns facing children and their families. Business representatives recognize the value of their ongoing participation in school and community services. As these examples illustrate, the neutral facilitator can help partners grow, change, and adopt many new roles as a result of their work together.

Keeps the HSC Partnership focused on common goals. The neutral facilitator uses the planning phase to move the HSC Partnership toward collaborative action for children and families. The pace and direction of the partnership come from their group dynamics and efforts to work together. A neutral facilitator builds from partners' readiness for collaboration, and works with them to develop a shared vision about desired outcomes for children and families. The neutral

facilitator always keeps the common goals of the partnership in the forefront as partners make connections between their goals, desired outcomes, and strategies for collaborative action. These connections ensure that partners' problem solving and consensus building result in strategies that apply collaborative approaches to address the needs of children and families.

Helps partners deal with changes in the level of support for collaboration. The HSC Partnership serves as a change agent for children and families in the community and is affected by the political climate of the community, state, and nation. Policy changes, elections, staff turnover, and political appointments at the community, state, and/or federal levels can all have an effect on the amount of support which the HSC Partnership receives from decision makers and funding sources. These changes, in turn, can affect the partnership's momentum, either positively or negatively. The neutral facilitator increases the partnership's ability to respond to such changes by equipping partners with a shared vision, with problem solving skills, and with strong collaborative relationships. Partners are, therefore, better able to respond to increasing or decreasing levels of support for collaboration.

Builds local leadership. Each HSC Partnership must develop mechanisms for shared leadership if it is to maintain equity among partners and flourish over time. In developing shared leadership, HSC Partnerships aim for representation of the home, school, and community, either formally or informally. The neutral facilitator actively cultivates candidates, especially parents, for leadership positions throughout the planning phase.

Over time, the neutral facilitator helps partners carve out new roles—roles that are manageable, that fit with partners’ interests and skills, and that support a collaborative approach. The neutral facilitator supports and encourages partners as they exercise new skills and assume shared responsibility for implementing the HSC Partnership’s collaborative efforts.

What strategies can a neutral facilitator use to assist HSC Partnerships?

The neutral facilitator uses a wide range of strategies during the planning phase of HSC Partnership development. The ways in which the neutral facilitator applies these strategies depend on the partnership’s needs and preferences, as well as on the facilitator’s skills, time commitment, and resources. There are six general strategies that SEDL staff used as neutral facilitators to assist and guide HSC Partnerships during the planning phase. They are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Recruiting and Maintaining Membership. The neutral facilitator helps recruit and maintain the involvement of diverse partners representing families, school staff, and representatives of the community. Thus, the HSC Partnership builds from a base of individuals with diverse backgrounds, roles, education, etc. The neutral facilitator works to ensure that a committed core of partners who regularly attend meetings emerges over time. The neutral facilitator monitors participation and keeps partners involved in the planning phase. The neutral facilitator also identifies ways that the partnership can expand its membership when the partners’ work suggests the need for new perspectives or better representation.

Convening Meetings and Developing Meeting Summaries.

The neutral facilitator interacts with an HSC Partnership most frequently in the context of partnership meetings. The neutral facilitator develops the agenda with input from partners, identifies skill-building activities to support partnership development, and leads partnership meetings. When the neutral facilitator assumes these responsibilities, all partners can participate freely in discussion and activities. The neutral facilitator also prepares written summaries that capture the progress of the HSC Partnership and ensures that this information is shared with decision makers, partners, and other interested persons.

Strengthening Communication Skills. The neutral facilitator promotes positive interaction among people who traditionally have not worked together. Regardless of their prior training and background, all partners benefit from reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses in their personal communication styles. The neutral facilitator guides discussions and activities at meetings to help partners grow to respect and value their differences as well as their common concerns. The neutral facilitator models and builds communication skills so that partners become skillful at building consensus and at collaborative problem solving. The neutral facilitator encourages partners to make linkages across programs and to strengthen collaborative relationships among partners. The facilitator also uses frequent group reflection as a way to help partners recognize their growth, stumbling blocks, and progress. The neutral facilitator sets aside time at meetings for partners to talk about their progress and to make changes, as needed, to enhance their work together.

Developing a Shared Vision and Priorities for Action. The neutral facilitator helps partners develop a common understanding of the gaps in the community's existing resources and services for children and families. When the focus is held firmly on the needs of children and families, blaming and defensiveness usually subside. Partners can then practice collaborative problem solving and consensus building to identify their common concerns and desired outcomes for children and families. The neutral facilitator helps partners fashion their purpose and direction to impact children and families in the community. The neutral facilitator draws from his/her knowledge of effective practices to help partners design effective collaborative efforts. The neutral facilitator also helps partners identify and secure resources for implementation, and develop indicators of progress that address the goals and desired outcomes of the partnership.

Cultivating Local Leadership. An effective neutral facilitator recognizes the importance of helping partners learn how to facilitate the HSC Partnership themselves. A neutral facilitator expands partners' skills so that they can build consensus, adopt non-hierarchical roles, and share decision making responsibilities. The neutral facilitator then works with the partners to identify how they will assume shared responsibility for the partnership. The neutral facilitator's role shifts from one of leader to one of advisor and coach so that the partnership can practice its new skills in working together. During the transition in leadership, partners benefit from revisiting their goals, vision statements, and other written materials. Many HSC Partnerships select a team of three persons, representing home, school, and community, to direct the partnership. The collaborative activities

that emerge from the planning phase offer opportunities to share leadership in the partnership's ongoing activities. The neutral facilitator offers feedback and encouragement to the partners as they assume these responsibilities for themselves.

Building Support for Collaboration. HSC Partnerships must build support for collaboration if they are to have a lasting and meaningful impact on children and families in the community. The neutral facilitator helps partners identify and secure a range of resources, including material, human, technical, and financial resources, to support the partnership and its collaborative efforts. This includes working with partners to identify starting points for their collaborative efforts—starting points that are manageable, and that build momentum by continuing to cultivate additional support and resources over time. Partners can also build support for collaboration by encouraging media coverage of HSC Partnership activities, and by arranging for partners to speak at conferences, at parent meetings, and meetings of professional associations. The neutral facilitator also encourages partners to advocate for policy changes and expanded services for children and families, to support the HSC Partnership vision.

Summary

A neutral facilitator provides valuable assistance to developing HSC Partnerships. A neutral facilitator can be most useful to HSC Partnerships when they undertake the planning phase and are committed to working collaboratively. The neutral facilitator can help the HSC Partnerships to build from and connect one stage of the planning phase to another as they prepare to extend collaboration efforts.

HSC Partnerships are unique in their diverse membership and involvement of people who traditionally have not worked together.

The neutral facilitator can help partners feel comfortable with this diversity and ensure that their differences do not interfere with their work together.

This booklet describes a number of benefits that the neutral facilitator offers to HSC Partnerships. They include:

- Creating a positive environment within the HSC Partnership so that trust can grow;
- Suspending traditional roles and influences;
- Helping the HSC Partnership deal with conflict;
- Keeping the HSC Partnership focused on common goals;
- Dealing with changes in support for collaboration; and
- Building local leadership.

The neutral facilitator uses the strategies described in this booklet to guide HSC Partnership development and to equip partners with the skills and collaborative relationships they need to work together. The HSC Partnership thus will possess a solid base of information, an action plan, and institutional as well as interpersonal support for collaboration. With these resources, partners are prepared to implement collaborative efforts that aim to improve the lives of children and families in the community.

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