

# ESSENTIAL tips for successful collaboration

**T**his document represents a synthesis of the key lessons learned throughout a five-year initiative driven by a successful, national-level collaborative around

school-based teen pregnancy prevention. It describes the key elements that contribute to the development and sustainability of successful collaborations around complex issues.

# Background

In response to the social and economic costs associated with teen pregnancy, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) launched an innovative initiative in 1997, The Joint Work Group on School-Based Teen Pregnancy Prevention (JWG). Comprised of eight national organizations representing a diverse group of policymakers and practitioners, the mission of the JWG was "to explore and strengthen the role that state and local education and health policymakers and personnel can play in preventing teen pregnancy."

To achieve its mission, the JWG sought to facilitate greater collaboration between health, education, and legislative entities, first at the national level, then at the state level. Specifically, the JWG engaged in efforts to educate their diverse constituencies, and to provide technical assistance to state teams seeking to integrate and strengthen multidisciplinary collaboration around teen pregnancy prevention.

Throughout the five-year initiative, the JWG learned a great deal about collaborative processes, including inherent challenges and plausible strategies for addressing those challenges. By highlighting the lessons learned, this document offers ideas on ways that multidisciplinary groups can develop effective collaborations around teen pregnancy and other complex issues.

## Collaboration: A Viable Approach to Today's Complex Issues

A collaborative is comprised of individuals and groups that are aware of the value and practicality of integrating resources to address society's most chal-

lenging issues, ones such as teen pregnancy that are global, multidimensional, systemic and long-term, difficult to define, and therefore, difficult to solve.<sup>1-3</sup> The potential for collaboration exists in every segment of society, at the local, state, and national level, from ethnic groups, labor unions, neighborhood associations and businesses, to state and national level governmental and non-governmental organizations, and legislatures, wherever there are individuals with the willingness, capacity, and foresight to address complex problems in an efficient manner.<sup>1,2</sup>

With a steadfast commitment to a common goal, members of a collaborative can develop an effective network of responsibility by sharing time, funding, and accountability, and engaging the strengths of individual members. In practical terms, however, collaborative work presents challenges that can prove to be insurmountable if not anticipated.

## Tips for Successful Collaboration

The following tips are intended to be helpful to groups and individuals who are considering being part of a collaborative, as well as those who are currently involved in collaborative efforts. Presented in sequential order, the tips correspond with the three phases of project planning and evaluation, formative, process, and summative.\*

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\* A model or framework that incorporates evaluation into all phases of a project may be helpful to guide the work of a collaborative. Two useful frameworks include the *Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health* [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1999). [On-line]. Available: <http://www.cdc.gov/eval/framework.htm>] and *The Social Marketing Framework* [National Cancer Institute. (1989). Making Health Communication Programs Work. [On-line]. Available: <http://cancer.gov/pinkbook>].

## 1 • INVOLVE A DIVERSE GROUP OF STAKEHOLDERS

Tackling the increasingly complex issues of our evolving society requires the variety of perspectives and insights, attributes and skills (e.g., listening, flexibility, consensus building, conflict resolution, information-gathering) afforded by a diverse group of stakeholders. A growing collaborative can encourage broad-based involvement by framing a particular issue using the inclusive language of a unifying theme that attracts those individuals and entities that otherwise may not have been interested, willing, and/or able to be involved. Positive Youth Development (PYD) is one such theme.\*

Aware of the growing body of evidence suggesting that programs integrating PYD principles are having sustained, positive effects on teen sexual behavior,<sup>4,5</sup> the JWG promoted PYD in its collaboration with key stakeholders in health and education at the state level. The underlying principles of PYD are inherently inclusive as they require attention to protective and risk factors within the family, and broader school and community contexts in which youth are embedded, and therefore, encourage the involvement of a variety of individuals within these contexts.

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\* Representing 'best practices,' PYD is a new paradigm that replaces traditional, deficit-driven approaches to prevention with a more positive and comprehensive approach to youth well being. Its tenets reflect the notion that positive development occurs when opportunities and supports are plentiful within the contexts in which youth are embedded.

## 2 • ALLOW FOR SUFFICIENT FRONT-END TIME TO BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION / PREPARE TO FACE CHALLENGES

The early stages of a collaborative are very important to its long-term success. By allowing for plenty of front-end time, a collaborative can ensure the development of a strong foundation for moving forward. Ideally, the early stages should be allocated to a variety of relationship-building and planning activities (e.g., learning about one another's organizations and establishing trust; developing a leadership structure and the management capacity to sustain an effort over time). In contributing to a solid foundation, these activities are fundamental to the development of a shared vision and plan for sequential change.

During this initial foundation-building phase and throughout the work of a collaborative, it is likely that challenges will arise -some testing the cohesiveness of the group itself. Therefore, it is important to prepare to face challenges with acceptance and optimism. As illustrated by the examples that follow, though some challenges may be inevitable, they are certainly not insurmountable.

Specifically, the JWG invested a considerable amount of time throughout the initiative overcoming challenges associated with:

- **Clarifying goals and objectives relevant to the overall mission.** Although there may be clarity early on with regard to an overall mission, it can be difficult for a collaborative to work through the details surrounding specific steps to be taken (i.e., who should do what by when). Nevertheless, it is important to move forward in a purposeful manner - that is, by taking the time to develop (and put in writing) goals and objectives relevant to the overall mission before 'diving into' specific activities.

- **Developing a leadership structure.** Members may be reluctant to identify and assume leadership roles within a collaborative, particularly during the early stages. This is not surprising given the natural desire to create an atmosphere that contributes to a sense of equality. Nevertheless, it is important to develop some type of leadership structure from the onset of the collaborative. Evidence suggests that a non-hierarchical, shared approach to leadership<sup>1</sup> is an effective way to engage the strengths of individual members while also contributing to a working environment where all members feel valued. Indeed, the JWG discovered that this approach to leadership was an efficient and effective way to meet its many responsibilities.
- **Working in collaboration with members of varying perspectives, and levels of experience and expertise.** At times, differences among members may translate into different approaches to meeting a particular goal. Skills and attributes (e.g., listening, decision-making, conflict resolution, flexibility) that are often taken for granted are invaluable when it comes to working through differences, achieving consensus, and moving towards a particular goal.
- **Changing membership.** The momentum of an initiative can be altered at times by the addition of new organizations, staff turnover, and the subsequent introduction of new members that have to be familiarized with the work completed prior to their arrival. Although the process of bringing new staff and organizations 'into the fold' may take some time, it also serves as an opportunity for renewed energy and ideas. The JWG discovered that times of turnover and change can also be used as an opportunity to revisit the collaborative's mission, goals, and accomplishments to

date, thereby contributing to a renewed sense of purpose and commitment.

- **Serving the memberships of individual organizations.** In some cases, differences can emerge regarding the mission of a collaborative as a whole and the missions of the individual organizations that comprise a collaborative. The more diverse the group, the more likely it is that differences will arise. The JWG discovered that regular meetings could provide a forum for open and honest communication, enabling members to discuss their organizational needs and explore methods for serving all of their memberships.
- **Working amidst different organizational systems.** Members of a collaborative may have to go through different clearance processes (e.g., different channels of approval for specific activities, documents, etc.), which can ultimately increase the turnaround time for various activities. It is important to take this into consideration when attempting to establish realistic deadlines for specific projects.

### 3. ESTABLISH A SHARED VISION

A shared vision can be articulated in the form of a broad goal or mission statement (e.g., "to explore and strengthen the role that state and local education and health policymakers and personnel can play in preventing teen pregnancy"). It serves as a catalyst for developing an action plan that includes concrete steps to be taken by members of a collaborative. The development of a shared vision should begin with a comprehensive needs assessment that enables members to pursue and articulate a common ground. This shared vision should be re-visited periodically throughout the work of a collaborative so that members are able to remain focused on this common ground rather than the agendas of individual members/ organizations.

## 4. CONDUCT A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Evaluation is often considered long after efforts are underway, and even more often as an after-thought. However, evaluation can be a powerful tool when it is incorporated, from the beginning, into all aspects of a collaborative's efforts. An evaluation logic model or framework such as the Social Marketing Framework may be helpful in this regard - that is, for conceptualizing and thinking through the entire process of designing, implementing, and evaluating the work of a collaborative. Conducting a needs assessment is the first step in this process.

A thorough needs assessment enables a collaborative to determine the needs and expectations of stakeholders, the dynamics of working relationships among stakeholders and their respective organizations, as well as the nature and status of other factors that may influence the success of an initiative (e.g., local leadership, collaborative experience, management capacity).

The initial needs assessment conducted by the JWG enabled members to identify common questions, and to ascertain (via discussion groups and questionnaires) the role that their respective constituents could play in addressing teen pregnancy, and their constituents' perceptions of how schools could be involved in an integrated approach to teen pregnancy prevention. This important first step served as a springboard for all subsequent activities throughout the five-year initiative.

It should be mentioned that before detailing an evaluation plan, it is important to consider the evaluation capacity of the collaborative. It may be beneficial to involve a professional evaluator that can offer helpful suggestions regarding what information is needed and how to collect it in order to answer key questions.

## 5. ARTICULATE A DATA-DRIVEN PLAN OF ACTION

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by members of a collaborative is the complex process of moving from a broad mission statement to the 'nuts and bolts' of the work to be done. This process involves somewhat of a 'balancing act', that is, a thoughtful weighing of needs vs. resources (e.g., time, money, staff) available to address those needs. Given the natural tendency to try to do too much with too little (e.g., develop objectives and agendas that are overly ambitious), it is imperative to begin the planning process with the development of SMART objectives - Specific, Measurable, Appropriate, Realistic, and Time specific- and the subsequent articulation of an action plan. Writing SMART objectives is often easier said than done.

Indeed, the JWG discovered that one of the most cumbersome aspects of the planning process was the articulation of four to five SMART objectives for each of its projects. However, the JWG quickly learned that SMART objectives were fundamental to the success of each activity whether it entailed planning and conducting a meeting or developing a document.

### Process

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## 6. DEVELOP A SHARED APPROACH TO MEETING RESPONSIBILITIES

A non-hierarchical approach to leadership serves as a foundation for sharing the workload and meeting responsibilities. It enables members of a collaborative, either individually or in teams, to take on specific projects that require their particular level of experience or expertise. Thus, a shared approach to meeting responsibilities can be an efficient and effective way for a collaborative to:

- **Coordinate meetings and presentations.** JWG members shared the responsibility of hosting meetings and tending to the logistics (e.g., scheduling, developing and refining agendas, hiring facilitators, recording minutes, etc.). Members also conducted a variety of joint presentations at national and state conferences regarding the informational and technical assistance needs of the members' constituencies.
- **Conduct research and disseminate information.** JWG members collected, interpreted, and disseminated prevalence and related epidemiological data about teen pregnancy as well as school-based efforts to constituents.
- **Develop effective tools.** The JWG developed and submitted to the CDC: the *Blueprint for the Education Community's Involvement in Teen Pregnancy Prevention and A National Framework to Help Schools Become Partners in Preventing Teen Pregnancy*. The former was to guide the actual work of the JWG in engaging the education community, and the latter was to be used as a tool for communicating the variety of strategies that would be used by the JWG and its member organizations to address school-based teen pregnancy prevention.
- **Articulate strategies for the provision of services.** JWG members developed a strategy for providing technical assistance to teams of stakeholders in health and education from select states to facilitate action planning around integrated, school-based teen pregnancy prevention efforts. Specific activities included the development of a protocol for state selection, site visits of up to eight states by teams of two, the selection of six states to receive training and technical assistance, and the development of a strategy for the delivery of training and technical assistance.

## 7 • MAINTAIN CONSISTENT AND EFFECTIVE CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

Effective channels of communication among members of the collaborative, and with funders, constituents, and key partners, are an invaluable mechanism for building working relationships. These channels need to be established early on and be re-evaluated periodically given the likelihood of changes/shifts in membership.

The JWG found several strategies to be particularly useful throughout the initiative, including:

- Face-to-face contact during the early phases of planning;
- The formation of a group e-mail to encourage and maintain involvement;
- The use of a listserv; and
- The involvement of a professional facilitator in strategic planning, as well as conference calls and meetings.

These strategies were fundamental to the success of the initiative as they contributed to the establishment of trusting relationships, facilitated constant communication among JWG members, with constituents and partners, and with states, and enabled the JWG to reach a broader audience with its activities and publications.

## 8 • MONITOR PROGRESS FREQUENTLY: REASSESS, REVISE, AND RECOMMIT

Process evaluation can enable a collaborative to carefully monitor its progress, make midcourse adjustments, and improve programs and services while efforts are underway. It entails articulating and assessing interim benchmarks including those activities (e.g., the creation of a durable forum for discussion and consensus

building, the gathering, development, and publishing of relevant information, and dissemination efforts) that are important indicators of successful collaboration.

The need for midcourse 'adjustments' (e.g., reassessing and revising short and long-term goals and objectives or reconstituting the membership of a planning team) should not be viewed as barriers to the success of a collaborative, but rather a normal part of a complex process.

## **Summative**

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### **9. ASSESS THE COLLABORATIVE'S EFFORTS**

When the work has been completed, summative evaluation enables a collaborative to measure the effectiveness of efforts, to document successes, and to demonstrate accountability, ultimately increasing the likelihood of future funding. The key questions are:

- Did you do what you said that you would do?
- To what extent were goals and objectives met?
- Based on findings, what are the logical next steps?

The JWG contracted with a professional evaluator to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of its state-based training and technical assistance efforts. The evaluation, which entailed a variety of strategies (e.g., participant exit survey to assess satisfaction and the extent to which project objectives were met; follow-up phone interviews with planning team members to ascertain perceptions of the project planning and implementation process; online participant survey to assess the existence and extent of ongoing collaborative efforts around TPP), indicated that the

JWG played an important role in integrating and strengthening the effectiveness of state and local school-based teen pregnancy prevention efforts within five states.

It is important to not only assess traditional outcomes (e.g., reductions in rates of HIV, STDs, TP), but also those associated with becoming a successful collaborative (e.g., building broad-based involvement of a diverse group of stakeholders; establishing effective channels of communication among members of the collaborative, with constituents, and with funders and key partners; developing a leadership structure that enables members to efficiently meet their many responsibilities; creating a durable forum for discussion and consensus building).

### **10. SHARE LESSONS LEARNED**

Stories of successful collaboratives are few and far between. This is not surprising given that they are faced with the daunting task of bridging social, economic, and physical barriers to: finding one another; developing effective channels of communication; discovering common ground; articulating a shared vision for their efforts; developing short and long-term goals and SMART objectives; and then carrying out this shared vision amidst an atmosphere of funding constraints, varying political forces, and the requirements of those who are far removed from the communities being served.

Nevertheless, there are success stories with lessons to be shared. Indeed, throughout the five-year initiative, JWG members learned a great deal about collaborative processes in general, including inherent challenges and plausible strategies for addressing those challenges.

By sharing lessons learned, the JWG hopes that this document will serve as a valuable resource for future initiatives of a similar nature by helping to inform effective strategies for bringing together a multidisciplinary group around a complex issue.

## Endnotes

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## Partners/Collaborative Members

The JWG is comprised of the:

- ◆ Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs (AMCHP)
- ◆ American School Health Association (ASHA)
- ◆ Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)
- ◆ Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
- ◆ National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)
- ◆ National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
- ◆ National Education Association (NEA)
- ◆ National School Boards Association (NSBA)

Partners include the:

- ◆ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- ◆ National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (NCPTP)

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