

Introduction

School partnerships are critical to the success of a program. Schools are a primary source for recruiting new participants, and a primary partner in ensuring the academic advancement of students.

Overview

To develop strong school partnerships, organizations should follow the steps outlined below:

- ❑ Research Potential Partner Schools
- ❑ Establish Partnerships
- ❑ Maintain Partnerships

Research Potential Partner Schools

Identify several (3-6) potential school partners to investigate. Factors to consider when researching a potential school partner include the following:

- ❑ **Low-income:** Focus on schools where 70% or more of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.
- ❑ **Location:** Select a location within a 20-minute drive from the program.
- ❑ **Transportation:** Consider if there is a viable transportation plan for the students from the school.
- ❑ **Size:** Find a school large enough (or enough schools) for you to recruit the number of students you need. SEA recommends the 8:1 rule. If a program aims to select 16 students, it should expose at least 128 students to the opportunity. This ratio allows the program to create a competitive selection process to choose the most committed and motivated participants. As a result, chosen students feel fortunate to have a slot, which motivates them to continue working hard and being committed.
- ❑ **Student age:** Target schools where you can recruit students in 5th or 6th grade. Starting with 5th or 6th graders is ideal because they are young enough to still have kid-like enthusiasm for new activities and old enough to participate in a program where practices sometimes end at 7pm and tournaments last all weekend.
- ❑ **Saturation:** Evaluate how saturated the school is with other afterschool programs. In some cases, many partnerships means there is a strong culture of support and engagement with afterschool partners. On the other hand, schools who are already saturated with partners may not need the additional partnerships and may make it difficult to recruit enough students to join your program.

Establish Partnerships

- ❑ **Pursue multiple options:** After identifying 2-5 schools that meet the criteria above, pursue all options at once, always being clear with school staff that you are talking to multiple schools in search of the most promising school partnership.
- ❑ **Form relationship with school leadership:** Get the Principal is excited about the program, and ensure that he/she is able to be responsive to the needs of the program. Evaluate the principal's responsiveness to phone calls and emails in determining if this is a school you want to partner with.
- ❑ **Form relationship with school staff:** Ask to meet with other school staff, in addition to the Principal, who will be your primary contacts at the school (vice principal, team leaders, physical education teachers, etc.). Bring literature to "sell" the program and be clear about your expectations for the partnership.
- ❑ **Create a Memorandum of Understanding:** After deciding on a school to pursue, establish a Memorandum of Understanding. The MOU should include the commitments that the school will make to your program, and the commitments your program will make to the school. Among other topics, it may outline expectations about:
 - ❑ The number of students to be served annually
 - ❑ Description of services to be provided by the program
 - ❑ How the program will gain access to students for recruiting
 - ❑ How the program will gain access to school records for program participants (grades, test scores, behavioral concerns, attendance, IEP plans, etc.)
 - ❑ Arrangements for safely transporting students
 - ❑ Program commitment to conduct background checks and trainings for all staff and volunteers
 - ❑ What support school staff members will provide program staff
 - ❑ Formal meetings to occur during the year

See "Additional Resources" for a sample MOU from Racquet Up Detroit.

Maintain Partnerships

- ❑ **Checkpoint meetings:** You should set up at least three "checkpoint meetings" with the Principal or another key school leader throughout the school year - at the start of the year, mid-way through the year, and at the end of the year. These meetings are opportunities to check-in about how things are going, share pertinent information, and look at upcoming events.
- ❑ **Be present at the school:** Find ways for staff to be in the school as much as possible so that you are highly visible to teachers, administrators, and students. A staff

member should be visit the school a minimum of twice a week. Some ways to do this:

- ❑ Attend (and offer to volunteer at) school events such as Family Nights, Awards Ceremonies, Science Fair, and Talent Shows.
- ❑ Arrange school pick-ups so that staff members enter the school to get students and interact briefly with teachers, as opposed waiting outside for students.
- ❑ Learn when teachers have lunch or breaks, and casually stop by to say hello and build your informal relationships.
- ❑ **School secretary:** The school secretary can be one of your strongest allies, and is often the key to things like school schedules, student grades, and teacher contact information. Work to build a strong, positive relationships with him/her from the very start. Stop by every time you are in the school just to say hello. Little gestures, like asking how his/her day was or giving him/her a program t-shirt, go a long way.
- ❑ **Attending meetings:** Attend meetings about students whenever possible. Some program staff attend teachers' weekly team meetings. Some set up quarterly check-ins with teacher teams. All try to be present at parent-teacher meetings concerning individual students.
- ❑ **Sharing info and results:** Remember to share with teachers all the great things happening in your program. Share your calendar and invite them to events. Share news and photos from events such as tournaments, college trips, and community service events. Give updates on their alumni who are still involved in your program. As teachers see how comprehensive the program is, they will be more likely to communicate with you and refer strong students to you.
- ❑ **Getting information from the schools:** Most schools will require that every student's guardian sign a form, annually, giving the school permission to share information about their student with your program staff. Include these forms as part of your annual re-enrollment paperwork, along with things like getting updated health and emergency contact information.
- ❑ **Invite teachers to your building:** Getting teachers to your building is a great way to help them see and understand the full scope of what students do in your program.
 - ❑ **Teacher Appreciation Days:** Lead Teacher Appreciation Days where you invite teachers to your building and thank them for everything they do. Have students play a strong part in inviting teachers to come by creating and handing out invitations to their teachers. The event might include student-teacher hit-arounds, student matches, tours of the facility, giving t-shirts to teachers, and a speech by students thanking the teachers and recognizing them for their work.

- ❑ **Teacher team-building:** If your program is skilled at leading team-building activities, offer to lead a fun, teacher team-building at your program site without students present. Create a fun event with team challenges (squash and non-squash) that help teachers get to know and interact with one another. Consider inviting alumni from the school to help lead the events with their former teachers.
- ❑ **Squash events:** Tell teachers when their students are playing squash matches or tournaments and invite them to visit and see their students on court. Give out schedules when possible.

Additional Resources

- ❑ [Developing Effective Partnerships to Support Local Education](#) by School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts
- ❑ [Partnerships for Learning: Promising Practices in Integrating School and Out-of-School Time Program Supports](#) by the Harvard Family Research Project

SEA Shared-Drive Resources

- ❑ [Racquet Up MOU with Partner School](#)