

## 5 Helpful Tips for Effective School Collaboration

By Sommer Clayborne | Categories: Professional Learning

Just like working a 25-piece puzzle-or if you are like me and up for a challenging 500-piece puzzle-searching around for pieces that fit can bring you a sensational feeling of accomplishment and yet the most dreadful feeling of discouragement. During my recent journey of collaborating within a school setting, I experienced similar feelings of excitement and challenge. Whether you are working with an after-school program, a grant-funded program, or any resource inside of a school designed to support the success of children, effective collaboration may take a lot of trial and error. Here are 5 tips that have helped me ease the awkwardness of being a guest in an already established organization and fit all the right pieces together in hopes of creating a wonderful picture and community partnership.



### #1 Remain a humble houseguest

This was my first lesson learned after taking on a full-time position working on bridging the school day with an after-school program. After meeting with the Assistant Superintendent, Principal, and Assistant Principal on possible locations in the school where I could have an office, a music room opened up. I was so excited that I would have an actual classroom to display all my years of childcare memorabilia that I began packing up for my new office right away. On move-in day as I opened my new office door for the first time, I felt an incredible burst of heat emerge from the cracked door. When I walked in I realized my wonderful music room was actually a musical instrument storage closet fully equipped with no ventilation system, five floor-to-ceiling steel shelving units that had not been moved for a decade at least, two filing cabinets, and a desk.

Instead of showing my displeasure to anyone, I remained humble and grateful that I was given a space in which to work, and that my program was even accepted into the school. As I started unpacking I found the best treasure of all, a window hidden behind one of the filing cabinets! Later that day I thanked the principal for cleaning out a space for me and in return I was thanked for being so flexible

and accommodating. Things may not always be ideal or proceed according to our plans, but if we remember we are guests invited for a greater purpose, we may be asked to come back and continue building our relationship.

## #2 Build relationships

Have you ever heard of the Crock-Pot vs. microwave theory? While using it to describe the most effect relationships, think about the functions of both of these kitchen staples. The Crock-Pot method allows you to slowly simmer a lot of information and questions while waiting for a newly developed and well-blended rapport in the end. The microwave method allows you to contribute the same amount of information and questions, but your outcome and answers are processed quickly with significantly less effort and authenticity. Building relationships with people of different personalities and perspectives takes time and is better developed in the long run using a "Crock-Pot" approach. You may want a quick microwave approach, but genuine relationships take time and patience. Allow patience and more authentic collaborations to be your stirring ingredient.



## #3 Know the true value of time

A very wise man once told me, "If you need to meet with someone that seemingly has no free time in their hectic schedule, than ask to hold their briefcase." Holding someone's briefcase, or in my situation a person's time and attention, is essential when dealing with busy professionals. Working in the school and relying on my grant liaison (who happens to be the school principal) it can be a difficult feat to schedule meetings and required conferences. Her time is so incredibly valuable to her school that my grant components are not her priority. Many of the meetings we have scheduled are cut short or cancelled due to the unexpected events. I have learned to hold her briefcase and offer to help her in a variety of settings. If there is an issue in the lunchroom, I will walk with her and continue our dialogue while assisting her in cleaning off the tables. I have not only become valuable to her during that short time but also she was able to continue with our informal meeting. It is my job to acquire information while at the same time respect the time of others. This template works with teachers and other school staff that are involved with the collaboration as well.

## #4 Get to know your community

What time of day do you experience your best temperament? Ask the same question about the professionals with whom you are working. Some people may need a few cups of coffee in their system or a scheduled break before being able to successfully have a conversation. I have learned that if I need to speak with individual teachers, the beginning of the day is hectic due to planning and preparation, and by the end of the day they are exhausted and ready to go home. The best time of day to communicate is during lunchtime, recess, and gym, when the kids are out of the classroom. This break in the day gives teachers time to recharge and refocus their strategies for the remainder of the school day. You will have more success connecting with people when they are less stressed

and mild-tempered. It is important to consider what time of day people experience the most anxiety and get to know what time of day they may be more relaxed and willing to support you.



## #5 Clearly define goals

The biggest mistake I have made when collaborating with multiple people is making the assumption that each party involved is able to identify their role and responsibility within the group. Each piece of the puzzle needs this information in order to make everything fit correctly. I had to keep this in mind when working with my team. We collectively bring rich, unique, and sometimes controversial approaches to the table. As long as there are clearly defined approaches to achieving the goal, all voices should be heard and considered. Who is most effective when communicating with parents? Who is most effective when communicating with schoolteachers and personnel? Who will make key decisions if a change in approach is needed? Part of the fun of collaborating is combining the differing skill sets and knowledge with the creativity it takes to complete different tasks.

What tips do you have for collaborating with your peers? Add your puzzle pieces and ideas in the comments.