

Partnering Across Disciplines to Improve School Connectedness
Paul V. Snyder, MSW, MDiv
Konopka Institute, University of Minnesota

Presented as part of the 10th SAHRC/LEAH Teleconference, *Connectedness: A Fundamental Need of All Young People*
February 11, 2010

Slide 8

Hi everyone. Today, I'm going to tell you a story. A story of how two professionals listened to the community, following their passions, identified and welcomed new partners, increased their knowledge, developed a new idea, and found funding to make the new idea become real. I'm one of these two professionals. The other is my colleague Pam Moore. And the new idea is the Minnesota Partnership for School Connectedness, otherwise known as MPSC.

Slide 9

I'll be reviewing a thematic approach to funding the Minnesota Partnership for School Connectedness. It's a process that worked for us, but can easily be adapted by others to pursue funding of other interdisciplinary initiatives. As I review our funding approach, I'll provide examples how MPSC – our school connectedness initiative – developed and changed during its development process.

But first, a quick description of the Minnesota Partnership for School Connectedness and a definition of School Connectedness so you have some context.

The Minnesota School Connectedness is a teacher professional development intervention that will enhance the ability of middle school teachers to increase students' cognitive, behavioral, affective, and academic engagement. The goal of the intervention is to increase student engagement in learning. The intervention will occur in eight middle schools in five different school districts in Minnesota. School districts representing a diverse student and teacher population were identified for participation in the development of this intervention. The intervention includes four components: 1) a three-day *Training Institute* in adolescent development and the application of healthy youth development and student engagement strategies to the classroom; 2) *Classroom Implementation* of the student engagement plan developed by each teacher, as well as teacher observation and coaching by trained MPSC staff; 3) three, one-day teacher *Cohort Convenings* for peer support and learning; and 4) attention to *School Context* through regular communication with participating districts' middle school principals and teacher presentations to same-grade teacher teams.

Probably the most succinct definition of school connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. This definition and some fuller context on how it came about can be found in the CDC reference attached to this call and entitled, ***School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth***.

Slide 10

So, why school connectedness?

Well, MPSC is the *next* new idea for the Konopka Institute. Its predecessor initiative was the Minnesota Youth Community Learning Initiative, W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded initiative in 7 communities throughout the state of Minnesota, focused on reigniting the spark for learning in middle and high school students. It was while directing that initiative that I first heard of the disconnect between students and their classroom teachers. This disconnect seemed to be particularly strong for students of color. It was during the time of MYCL that the Konopka Institute became more widely recognized for its effective community-university engaged work.

As a result of the success of MYCL, I was invited to serve on several grant review committees and issue task forces at state agencies. I was also invited to serve on the Steering Committee for the Minnesota Department of Education's Dropout Prevention and Graduation Retention Initiative. The Steering Committee was charged with conducting listening groups with students throughout the state on dropout prevention.

A key point is that I chose to serve on these committees and task forces. In so doing, I created opportunities to hear others' perspectives. I listened, I asked questions, and I learned. A lot. From school administrators, psychologists, teachers, and others more immediately connected to the education realm.

I developed relationships – connections – with state agency personnel who saw my interest, heard my questions. For this reason, the Konopka Institute was awarded a contract by the Department of Education to create a publication about what students said about staying in school and dropout prevention in Minnesota. It's the document in the reference list for today's call entitled ***Listening to New Voices***.

My colleague Pam and I traveled to the seven MYCL communities and listened to students. The most common reason we heard - and other steering committee members heard - for students struggling in school – not being engaged, not feeling connected— was that students didn't feel their teachers cared about them.

Slide 11

In the listening groups that Pam and I conducted throughout the state, we heard stories from students that made us both sad and angry. Students, particularly students of color, were not receiving the education they wanted and deserved. We conducted listening groups not only with the students, but also with the school personnel. The stories told by the students were confirmed by the adults we met with as well. These students could not identify adults in their schools who cared about them.

While Pam and I conducted the listening groups, our MYCL Initiative was wrapping up...and here at the University, one must generate one's own salary support. We had two choices – respond to what others wanted to fund or tap into our own passion for what we wanted to change in young people's lives and create our own new idea that we could propose to funders. I think you all know which we chose – the latter.

Like many great things, the genesis of the Minnesota Partnership for School Connectedness – occurred over a good meal. Pam and I reviewed what we liked best about the MYCL Initiative, what others said we did best, what we most liked to do, what we felt we could do to address the problem...and what we couldn't and therefore would need help with.

Slide 12

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, also known as Add Health, identified school connectedness as one of the most protective factors in the lives of young people. And, while our Division of Adolescent Health and Medicine was one of five research centers that conducted and analyzed the Add Health study, we knew that to work in schools we would need to engage community partners to inform the development of MPSC.

Community is defined broadly by us. It includes others at the University who value community-engaged work – and, in our case, particularly those in other University schools and disciplines. It includes public school personnel, at the building and district levels. It includes those at the Minnesota Department of Education. It includes all the students we listened to, both through the Dropout Prevention Initiative listening groups and others. It includes parents, teacher mentors, education advocates, including those focused on reducing educational disparities for students of color.

One of our partners was the Associate Dean in the College of Education who was introduced to us during our previous MYCL work. She connected us to the director of the teacher training prep program at the

University. Our initial vision – and, in hindsight, a *very naïve vision*, was to offer adolescent development and healthy youth development training to future teachers enrolled in the teacher prep program. Both the Associate Dean and the director of the teacher prep program told us that they've recognized the lack of adolescent and youth development curricula in the teacher prep program as a major fault. But they quickly let us know that they alone can't retool the curricula without the demand for such retooling coming directly from the field. If there's a concerted call from schools to change the curriculum, it could be changed. Otherwise, no matter what they recognize as needing improvement, their hands are tied.

So, our new idea would not reach all new teachers leaving the University's teacher prep program. It was at this time that we began to consider a school connectedness initiative in the schools themselves.

It was also at this time that we decided to create something unique. So many school connectedness interventions focus on the student alone. And many suggest that the lack of the connection is because of the student, hence labeling the student as the problem. We took a different approach. Essentially, that school connectedness is the result of connection between both student and adult in the school setting. And, therefore the adult is as much a partner in the student-adult connection as the student him- or herself. Our initiative would focus on providing skills to school personnel for increasing school connectedness.

From our community partners in schools and school districts, we learned that comprehensive interventions to address school connectedness, those that address school connectedness at every level throughout the school, are too overwhelming and too disruptive to staff cohesion. So, the comprehensive full school approach as outlined in the CDC publication was just too much for our school partners to consider.

This feedback led us to pursue a classroom only approach to addressing school connectedness, instead of focusing on a whole school initiative. This really resonated with the schools we eventually approached with our new idea.

We decided to conduct a teacher fellowship training. But, based on Konopka Institute experience, and backed by further research on the most effective methods of teacher professional development, we knew we wanted to do more than just one standalone training. So, we combined the initial three-day training with ongoing monthly classroom observation and follow-up coaching, plus three trainings during the school year for the participating teachers to gather, learn more, and share successes.

Traditionally, when identifying those with whom to meet in communities, Konopka Institute has used the classic community wheel – well known to those in Public Health. The wheel identifies different sectors, primarily organized by work focus. The different sectors (or spokes) around the community wheel might include persons such as business leaders, law enforcement officials, faith leaders, government officials, school principals, and others.

Slide 13

But when identifying whom to speak with in the community, it's important to consider not only their work, but the various ways in which they have different perspectives to share. This diagram helps to identify the diverse ways that one can contribute to a conversation regarding the development of an intervention that can benefit young people.

I have to admit, I have no idea where I obtained this diagram, hence the lack of citation. So share it with caution – and you didn't receive it from me. But I hope you find it valuable nonetheless.

Slide 14

Pam has a background in communications and sexuality education. My background is in social justice and social work. Neither of us have formal training in the education field. We knew, when we began this planning process, that in responding to our passion to work in this particular area, we had a steep learning curve ahead of us. We continually asked others what we should be reading; we met regularly

(two to three times a week) to review what we read, and discuss the implications of our new learning for the development of MPSC.

We noted the differences in language used across disciplines to discuss similar concepts. For example, *student engagement* is more commonly used in the education field than *school connectedness*, more commonly used in public health circles.

When meeting with others whom you want to join you in developing a new idea, I would encourage you to be bold. To, once again, not be afraid to tell your own story, to share why you feel especially called to this particular work on behalf of adolescents, and to share what you have heard from young people themselves. If you do all this, your story can be compelling one. Sometimes so compelling you'll be amazed.

While Michael Resnick (and for all of those not in this room, I'm smiling at him right now) While Michael graciously offered to serve as Principal Investigator for our proposal, we knew that we needed an education researcher to serve as Co-Principal Investigator. We met with Michael and literally went through the website listing for all the faculty in the University's College of Education. One person rose above all the others – Sandy Christenson – a nationally recognized student engagement and dropout prevention researcher. While recognizing that Sandy was probably too senior a researcher to be able or interested in contributing to our new idea, and that our best hope was for her to identify another researcher who might be interested, Pam and I scheduled a meeting with Sandy. We told our story – fully and with passion. At the end of the meeting, we asked Sandy if she knew anyone in the College who might be willing to work with us and serve as Co-PI on MPSC. With hardly a moment's pause, she said, "Me." We tried to be somewhat restrained in our complete sense of joy, for now we had a truly intercollegiate, interdisciplinary initiative headed by two well-respected senior researchers in their fields.

And, we had great confidence that the new idea was a good one.

Like Michael, Sandy continued to inform the development of the initiative, bringing forth new research, new perspectives, experience and wisdom.

Slide 15

But, Sandy's wasn't the only input we solicited and incorporated. We presented the new idea to old community partners and to new ones as well. We reformulated the idea, based on feedback of applicability, school schedules, substitute teacher reimbursements, the need for stipends to participating teachers, the involvement of teachers recognized as particularly well connected with students as co-developers of the teacher fellowship training curriculum, the translation of the participating teachers' learning to same grade teacher teams in their schools... The list goes on and on. And the new idea became stronger, more relevant, and more rigorous.

The new idea was also presented to researchers, those connected to the Konopka Institute in the fields of nursing, public health, and medicine, and to others besides Sandy in the College of Education. Our circle of consultants widened.

Sometimes what we heard from the researchers was not well received by those in the schools. Adjustments were made, agreed upon by both researchers and by school personnel, and the planning effort continued.

We tapped into longtime partners and new ones to help identify possible participating school districts. We received referrals from the College of Education, who convened representatives from school districts on various topics. We presented to these groups, and received helpful feedback.

We consulted Minnesota Department of Education school report cards for teacher professional development plans. We looked for key concepts like student engagement, improved school climate, greater sense of student-teacher connection. We noted which schools were focused on these areas and prioritized them as possible districts that might welcome our new idea.

We consulted with others to learn the best method to initially contact a school to “shop out” our new idea. Each school, each school district is different. We did our homework first so that no one felt trodden upon or excluded. We did our homework well and every district we were able to meet with, signed on.

Slide 16

Once our new idea was mostly formed, we recognized that we needed a talented grantwriter. We were uniquely positioned that we had resources to hire a grantwriter whom we respected, and who knew our work and our passion. We hired Judith Kahn – some of you may know her, as she’s the former Director of the Konopka Institute.

It’s important, too, to be aware of the funding trends, who’s funding what, who’s no longer funding what they previously funded, and how the present economy impacts funding priorities. Eventually, we were funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. When the funding announcement came out, because we had connected ourselves with so many who had heard about our new idea, several people contacted us about the announcement, thinking it was a good fit.

It was.

Slide 17

And now, I encourage you to think about what your new idea might be...

Thank you.