Congregation-School Partnerships: Keys to Success

Sara Skiles and David Sikkink

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Research team:

David Sikkink, PhD
Director, Cardus Religious Schools Initiative
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Notre Dame
dsikkink@nd.edu

Sara Skiles, PhD
Project Manager, Cardus Religious Schools Initiative
Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame

Jonathan D. Schwarz, PhD
Research Affiliate, Cardus Religious Schools Initiative
Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame

Sarah Harrison
Research Affiliate, Cardus Religious Schools Initiative
Graduate Student in Sociology, University of Notre Dame

Elliot Miller
Research Affiliate, Cardus Religious Schools Initiative
Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame

The Cardus Religious Schools Initiative (CRSI) is supported by Cardus, Inc of Hamilton, Ontario. It is a project of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society, within the Sociology Department at the University of Notre Dame. Founded in 2010, CRSI is a non-partisan research organization. Its mission is to generate new theoretical and empirical tools for understanding religious schools and provide information to leaders and educators across school sectors providing models for successful education.

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Introduction

Most U.S. congregations are involved in numerous forms of outreach into their local communities and globally, in part with the intent of alleviating social problems. One fairly common form of outreach is cultivating relationships with local public schools, with the goal of supporting students, teachers, and school administrators in an educational climate plagued by political controversy, diminishing funding, high teacher turnover, and low graduation rates, all of which are exacerbated in low-income areas. Such congregation-school partnerships have the potential to make a significant and important impact on the lives of the students involved. To discover the nature and success of such partnerships, researchers at the University of Notre Dame Cardus Religious School Initiative (CRSI) had discussions with two dozen representatives from churches, synagogues, and non-profit parachurch and other organizations. The findings from those conversations are outlined in this report.

To begin this project, CRSI staff decided to speak with representatives from congregations rather than schools, given the assumption that church and synagogue volunteers might have more time to devote to such conversations, and would likely be better able to give a comprehensive and historical view of the types of activities supported by their congregation-school partnerships. To build the list of congregations to contact, research staff searched online on denominational, church, and synagogue websites for evidence of congregation-school partnerships, searched for parachurch or other non-profit organizations involved (exclusively or not) in supporting congregations' involvement in social service delivery, and utilized personal and professional networks. This method yielded dozens and dozens of potential contacts. One of those contacts was with Kids Hope USA, an organization that connects congregations with public schools. Kids Hope provided contacts with several Catholic parishes with active public school partnerships. CRSI staff made contact with two dozen congregations and organizations (see the full list of participating congregations and organizations below)

and held conversations averaging 45 minutes in length about the origination, nature, tenure, success, failure, and other details of their partnerships with public schools. We did not find any examples of partnerships between Catholic churches and public schools, and the non-profit organization representatives that we spoke with could only think of a few partnerships involving Catholic churches out of hundreds and hundreds of programs. This is likely due to the fact that Catholic churches often support their own Catholic schools, and reflects the history of Protestant domination of public schools. The same is likely true of Islamic congregations.

It should be noted that these partnerships are likely not representative of all congregation-school partnerships. Rather, they are the ones that were easy to locate, and at which representatives were eager to share their stories. Researchers attempted contact with quite a few other churches, synagogues, and organizations without success, quite possibly because those partnerships had been less successful. Therefore, the results discussed in this report should not be considered necessarily typical of all congregation-school partnerships, but examples of fairly successful projects to which other partnerships might aspire.

Participating congregations

- Beth-El Congregation, Fort Worth, TX
- Carter Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Chicago, IL
- Central Reform Temple, Boston, MA
- East Heights United Methodist Church, Wichita, KS
- First United Methodist Church, Wichita, KS
- Irvington Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis, IN
- Nansemond River Baptist Church, Suffolk, VA
- Oakwood United Methodist Church, New Ulm, MN
- Perimeter Church, Atlanta, GA
- St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church, Spring, TX

- St. Kenneth Catholic Church, Plymouth, MI
- St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Omaha, NE
- St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Boston, MA
- St. Therese of Jesus Catholic Church, Aurora, IL
- Touro Synagogue, New Orleans, LA
- Westminster Presbyterian Church, Dayton, OH
- Woodcreek Church, Richardson, TX

Participating organizations

- 3e McKinney, McKinney, TX
- All Our Children, Boston, MA
- Episcopal Diocese of Dallas, Dallas, TX
- Kids Hope USA, Zeeland, MI
- Loving Houston, Houston, TX
- Micah Association, Richmond, VA
- National Church Adopt a School Initiative, Dallas, TX
- one + one, North Texas United Methodist Church
- One Church One School, Chicago, IL
- School Works, Irving, TX
- Unite Greater Dallas, Dallas, TX
- United Church of Christ national offices

Partnership Descriptions

Initial motivations and goals

While a few of the congregation-school partnerships we learned about began when school or school district officials reached out to religious congregations or parachurch organizations

seeking help, the vast majority of partnerships originated when church and synagogue leaders contacted school principals (sometimes by way of parachurch organizations such as Kids Hope USA) to initiate the relationship.

In most cases, the original decision to work with schools arose from the recognition of the difficulties faced by poor families in providing for basic needs for their children, both materially and in terms of quality education, and from the conviction that children deserve the opportunity to live up to their potential. Several church representatives spoke of rather vague ideas about knowing that the easiest ways to get to children from poor families is by working through the schools they attend, while others had a much more intentional motivation for focusing on schools. For instance, one synagogue leader explained that the congregation had completed a year-long discernment project related to determining its missional goals. Through this process, they determined that their focus should be on fostering social justice, and that the most likely social institutions through which to promote justice are the education and criminal justice systems. Recognizing that work done in the education system could alter children's likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice system later in life, the synagogue members decided to focus their mission efforts on a local public school. One Evangelical protestant congregation decided to work with a public school in particular rather than any other community organization because they expected to find a high proportion of "unchurched" children and families there to whom they could minister and spread the gospel.

An almost universal sentiment was that congregations wanted to serve as a resource for their communities. More than one congregational representative used the saying "If the church disappeared, would the community notice?" to explain their desire for impact. One representative spoke about the need to step put of the bubble of the parish in order to live out the congregation's values and to preach love and grace with their actions rather than words ("Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words.) Beyond this general desire to

serve their communities, church and synagogue leaders framed their motivations for forming partnerships in one or both of two veins; one rather patriarchal in tone, and the other coming from a stance of social criticism. In the first case, congregational representatives discussed how children are the "most deserving" of help, and that they aren't to blame for the poor conditions in which they live and learn. In some cases this manifested itself in the decision for churches to provide tutors and mentors that would, in addition to providing academic assistance, provide positive role models that are perceived as lacking in these children's lives, role models that could provide moral guidance and examples of "responsible" behaviors, work ethic, etc. In other cases, congregational representatives discussed the multiplicity of basic needs that families with limited means could not provide for their children that could be met via donations of clothing, food, and supplies from the members of the congregations to make up for deficiencies in family support.

Interestingly, congregations that conceptualized the need for involvement with public schools from a stance more critical of social structure than of parents and families provided many of the same services, but with slightly different rationales. For instance, some congregations operated with an understanding of the inadequate governance and funding of public schools, and were motivated to get involved to alleviate the situation. Therefore, these synagogue and church members also volunteered as tutors and mentors, but rather than viewing their roles as surrogate socializing agents, they saw the need to fill in the gaps left by substandard learning environments created by diminishing funding, difficult classroom environments for teachers, and complications surrounding curricular and testing mandates.

Likewise, many congregation members were critical of the circumstances that contribute to the socioeconomic status of the families from which students in poor public schools come, such as the inequalities in educational opportunities for students' parents that led to disparities in access to jobs that pay wages high enough to afford safe, quality housing, a reliable supply of healthy food, and basic material necessities like clothes, hygiene items, and ac-

cess to learning resources (supplies, computers, etc.). Given this perspective, congregation members donated clothes, food, and supplies in order to eliminate some of the sense of deprivation felt by students created, in their view, by an economic and political environment that is partially responsible for the impoverished conditions in which the families live. To overgeneralize a bit, the social criticism perspective was more often heard from synagogues than Protestant churches and vice versa for the patriarchal rationale, but our sense is that both perspectives could be found within each church and synagogue group.

In addition to discussing their motivations to partner with public schools, partnerships with particular public schools were chosen for reasons that congregations often discussed in terms of calling or interest in being good neighbors in their communities. In some cases, churches and synagogues partnered with schools very near them in proximity, citing a sense of neighborliness and desire to be involved in their surrounding communities (although one Jewish congregation changed location after beginning a partnership with a school, but even after moving out of the area, maintained the original relationship). This proximity often served functional purposes as well, as students could easily come to the synagogue and church buildings for activities, and congregational volunteers felt comfortable visiting the schools in neighborhoods with which they were already familiar.

In other cases, schools with greatest need were sought rather than schools closest to synagogue and church buildings, as students attending schools nearby were in relatively well to do neighborhoods. In one case, a church partnered with the school that 50 years earlier had provided space for the congregation to meet when it was newly-forming, and church members were happy to have the opportunity to repay the kindness two generations later. It is also worth noting that in many cases, very few of a congregation's children attended the school with which it partnered. Instead, while congregations were often in close proximity to their schools, congregation members were unlikely to live in the synagogue or church's neighborhood, and when they did, they were unlikely to send their children to these particular

schools.

Another story about the inception of the partnership between a Protestant church and its local public school stands out and is worthy of retelling at some length. The church collected children's winter outwear during the Advent season with the intention of donating it, and then rather haphazardly contacted a local elementary school, about which church members knew little. The church had decided that it would like to partner with a school if school leaders would welcome the relationship, but didn't have specific ideas about the form that such a partnership could take or who from the church might be involved and how. Therefore, the church member who had volunteered to head the church-school initiative met with the school's social worker to deliver the winter clothing, and asked what other needs they could help meet for the school and its students. The social worker said that families often struggled to keep their children supplied with uniforms. They agreed that the church would take the provision of uniforms on as a project and would supply the school with as many pieces of clothing necessary to meet students' needs.

As the meeting was ending, the social worker added as a parting thought that they had one "dream" wish for a washer and dryer for the school to meet needs related to keeping students in clean clothes duringt the school day. The church volunteer said that she would see what she could come up with, and they ended the meeting. The next day, without any advertisement of the need, another church member called the church to say that she had a washer and dryer in good condition in need of a home, hoping that the church staff might know someone who could use it. The congregation took this as a sign from God that this was the school and the ministry in which they were meant to invest, and the coordinator of the project said that this event became for her a "burning bush" that motivated her work. The church has since continuously supplied the school with all of the detergent and other laundry supplies that it needs, and replaced the original equipment at the end of its usefulness.

Key Players

One key finding from discussions with church and synagogue leaders was the necessity of having leaders in place at both the school and the congregation to facilitate the relationship. In most cases, congregations had an energetic and engaged coordinator, either volunteer or staff, who facilitated communication with the school, volunteer training and recruitment, solicitation and collection of donations, event organization, etc. The success of the partnerships depends very heavily on this coordinator role, both in terms of generating and maintaining interest from the congregation and for keeping the project at the forefront of the congregation's collective mind, and for ensuring the continuity of the project, so much so that as engaged as congregations are in the school partnerships, the future of these programs without such leadership is unsure. The coordinator role is quite intense for in many partners. We spoke with people who spend as much as 40 hours a week sometimes coordinating events, training volunteers, communicating with teachers and administrators, collecting donations, etc. One coordinator described the job as a labor of love, not for the faint of heart.

Likewise, and perhaps even more importantly is the need for an engaged contact person at the school. In many cases, this role was filled with a social worker or school counselor. The more this school representative was connected with students and their families and had an understanding of their specific needs, the better able congregations were to meet the needs of the students at the school. In some schools, counselors asked for help with general needs like school supplies, backpacks, healthy snacks, and teacher appreciation gifts, and congregations provided these without becoming overly engaged with the schools and their families. In other cases, school counselors and social workers had close connections with families and could ask for more specific help depending on needs at the time, such as help purchasing clothes for a student to wear to a parent's funeral, assistance with home furnishings and clothing after a home fire, food for a family suddenly without income, or connection with

an adult for a child with specific difficulties. Funding for such school personnel was tenuous in all of the low-income schools we learned about, and in the cases when funding was cut drastically or eliminated, the partnerships suffered greatly due to a lack of coordination from the school from a person who had close relationships with families and the time to nurture the partnership. The representative from Kids Hope USA, a non-profit organization that has paired hundreds and hundreds of school and congregations, said that one of the greatest predictors of a partnership's failing is lack of consistency in such facilitation at the school.

Outside of these two key positions in the partnership, there were no clear patterns regarding involvement of other players in congregations or schools. It was rare to find much involvement outside of the primary contact person in the schools, in large part because of the demand on teachers' and administrators' time. In a few cases, resistance from school or school district administrators greatly restricted the success of the partnerships, but absent such resistance, these programs operated fairly well even without involvement from other administrators. In the cases where principals were involved, the partnerships were greatly enhanced thanks to programmatic tie in with broader school activities and missions. For example, the principal in one low-income arts magnet school leveraged support from the partner church that had a strong music program to implement a very popular after-school dance program. The church provided volunteers to help staff the program and provided costumes for performances, but the principal's leadership was key in conceptualizing, implementing, and sustaining the program.

Likewise, these partnerships seemed to operate just fine without significant input from pastoral staff in congregations, but were enhanced when rabbis and ministers supported the partnership from the pulpit or through direct coordination and involvement. Their input seemed most crucial at the conceptualization and inception stages of the projects. In large congregations with more than one minister, the minster tasked with the oversight of outreach programs was likely to be involved in the coordination of the project, but it wasn't common

for pastors and rabbis to provide much more than face time in actual project activities, due to time constraints. The level of involvement of church and synagogue volunteers varied between and within partnerships based on the types of needs the schools had. When donations were needed for clothing drives, Christmas gifts, food to send home with families, school supplies, etc., church and synagogue coordinators reported participation from a sizable portion of the congregation, while there were usually relatively few people willing and able to work directly with students during the school day. Generally the more volunteers involved, the better, particularly for partnerships that offered tutoring and mentoring programs. But even those congregations that had only a handful of regular volunteers were able to maintain a consistent presence in the schools.

Services and Resources Provided

Academic assistance for students

Most partnerships provide some sort of human or material resources to supplement the schools' learning environments. In some cases, congregation volunteers provided direct assistance, such as tutoring and mentoring and donations of school supplies for students and for classrooms. One church provided weekly reading materials for every classroom in the school as well as sponsorship for the music program, while volunteers from another routinely brought their therapy dogs to assist children to remain focused on classroom tasks. In other cases, synagogues and churches provided services that supported the learning environment in other ways, such as the coordination of lunch hour and after school clubs (including a few bible study clubs, which in one case, the school and families directly requested), the provision of attendance and good behavior incentives, the coordination and participation in special school programming such as school assemblies, such as an MLK day program, or a school-wide community service. Another church deployed volunteers in response to the

elimination of the city's truancy program, so volunteers would to go the students' home and bring them to school when necessary.

In addition to these programs offered to elementary schools, we spoke with one church that partners with a high school to provide an after-school program that includes tutoring, a computer lab, and college preparation activities. Another church partners with a local high school's co-op program, opening the church building during school hours for special needs students to learn building maintenance and food preparation skills. In general, churches and synagogues were happy to provide academic assistance and saw the great need for it given the current state of the education systems in their areas, but congregation coordinators were quick to point out that academic assistance was a vehicle through which to connect with students, but not necessarily the end goal. That is, spending time with students allowed volunteers to provide love, adult connection, and other social support, and if there were academic gains as a result of this time together, that was almost just an added bonus.

It should be noted that tutoring took on various formats depending on the needs of the students and teachers, as well as the resources available to the congregation. In some cases, tutors came to the school campus after school and worked with students for a short period, while others came directly into classrooms during school hours to provide immediate assistance. A few congregations hosted after-school tutoring programs in their own buildings (which were in very close proximity to the schools) and provided tutoring, mentoring, access to computers, healthy snacks, and organized recreation time. At one church, the coordinator told a story of a mom who chose to send her children to this particular school although it was a long commute on two different busses to get there because she specifically wanted her kids to be able to participate in this after-school program.

An interesting thing we learned from one school is that volunteers were struggling to tutor students in math because even though they had volunteers generally adept at math, the Common Core method of teaching math to students was foreign to the tutors, and they

weren't able to help students learn in the way that they were being taught. Additional training for the volunteers would have been necessary to improve the situation, but teachers didn't have time to provide this, so math tutoring had all but stopped. In another case, standardized test scores for students in a middle school paired with a synagogue increased so significantly after the inception of the synagogue's tutoring program that school district officials "upgraded" the school to a high school, at which point the tutors no longer had the sufficient skills to tutor the students. The tutors had effectively worked themselves out of business!

Support for faculty and staff

Quite a few of the partnerships provided support for teachers, including donating teacher appreciation gifts, preparing classroom material for teachers, assisting in classrooms, and providing door prizes, snacks, and meals for teacher in-service days. One church coordinator explained that congregants weren't initially thrilled with the idea of focusing on teachers when resources could be channeled to more support for students instead, but came on board once the coordinator, a retired school teacher herself, explained that in the current environment of high demands and high pressure, low pay, and frequent turnover for teachers in public schools, supporting the teachers is supporting the students. A minister at another church explained that teacher retention went from 50% to 80% after the church's first year of teacher support activities, and while she didn't want to take all of the credit for that achievement (a common theme from many congregation representatives who were humble about their congregations' significant contributions), she did say that the appreciation efforts were met with gratitude, and created an environment of trust that helped the partnership to flourish.

In addition, volunteers helped with general school needs (e.g. office work, helping the school nurse) and it was common to hear about synagogues and churches participating in

campus clean up days, which involved raking leaves and painting, deep-cleaning the school, sprucing up the teachers' lounge, making general repairs, etc. Many of the low-income schools do not have parent-teacher organizations, so the congregations did what they could to meet schools' needs however they were asked.

For example, when one church contacted a school to investigate the possibility of forming a partnership, the principal explained that the school's greatest need was the development of community among the families. Political struggles in the area resulted in redistricting twice in three years, which meant that very few of the families knew each other, and very many of the families were unhappy with the lack of stability. Therefore, efforts at this school were focused on organizing but not really participating in community meals and other events. For example, at a spring cookout at the school, church members would provide food and other supplies while teachers would cook and parents would be asked to help serve, all in an effort to bring families together. Therefore, while church members made very few connections with students or their families, their work facilitated connections and social capital within the school.

In a few cases, congregation volunteers got involved in grant writing and/or advocacy for the schools, helping the school to secure important resources for the campus and community. In one instance, a synagogue launched a significant campaign to educate themselves about the dangers of childhood obesity in order to present a case to a local governing board about the need for an outdoor recreation area for the school, which was successful. That same synagogue later helped the school secure $25 million in funding to construct a new school building to replace the old one. Another congregation served for many years as a successful incubator for charter schools. Finally, in some cases, congregations directly donated money to schools as needed, although this was not possible in all cases, given legislated restrictions on how churches and synagogues could interact with public schools. Other congregations, however, expressed very little interest in becoming involved in advocacy work, both because

this wasn't something they had been asked to work on by school administrators, and because they were more interested in focusing their resources on working with children more directly.

Direct help for students and families

The longest part of most of our conversations with congregation coordinators involved discussion about the many, many ways that churches and synagogues are providing direct support to students and their families. Many congregations were providing school uniforms, winter coats, hats, and gloves, socks, shoes, underwear, and backpacks to cover basic daily needs. In some cases, congregations provided food for students to take home for the weekend, and in a few cases, that food was grown in the community garden on the school's campus that was partially tended by congregation volunteers. One church coordinator said that volunteers provided basic medical and hygiene items that students could take home such as toothpaste and toothbrushes, fever reducers, soap, deodorant, and in a few cases, provided financial support for students who needed glasses or other medical care. We also learned about all-school meals, end of the year and student of the month luncheons and dinners, as well as invitations for school community members to attend congregation dinners and parties. Congregation representatives also discussed fairly extensive service provision that required quite a bit of coordination and effort, such as the provision of a free day program for suspended students or preschool-aged childcare for single moms to allow parents to maintain employment, parenting workshops, Christmas gifts via adopt an angel type programs, a summer enrichment program that gave students in an urban area the opportunity to participate in local recreational and educational activities, and opportunities for internships and job training (for both high school students and parents). In quite a few cases, the families in greatest need in the school communities were either undocumented residents or very new immigrants, and therefore either didn't have access to publicly-provided support or were not yet integrated enough into the community to take advantage of it. Therefore, the direct provision of basic

needs described here was a lifeline to many families.

Very engaged congregations were also able to respond to the specific needs of the families with whom they became familiar, such as donating furniture to families without, providing transportation, direct financial support in times of crisis, assisting with the college search and application process, etc. In many cases, the relationships that congregation volunteers formed with students in elementary school continued as the children aged, and the pairs have stayed in contact well past high school graduation in some cases. While such long-term relationships was not a particular goal of any of the programs, they are a natural consequence of the nature of the relationships that were formed, as they were motivated not just by a desire to help students with reading and math skills, but to provide a meaningful and significant connection with a supportive adult.

Two programs were particularly noteworthy, and while not typical examples of what congregations were doing, are worth sharing. One principal of an inner-city school asked the leadership of the church next door to the school (of which he was a member) for help in the morning getting students to and from school safely. The school and church are located in a neighborhood in which violence is not unusual, so parents and students had significant concerns regarding students' safety on their trip to school. To combat this, church members spread out in the area around the school every morning and afternoon, taking posts to watch out for and protect against potential dangers during students' commutes to school. Responding to a somewhat similar need in a different community, the pastor from another church reports that after finding out that a high proportion of the homeless children in his town were enrolled at the church's partner school, the congregation supported the pastor and his colleagues in a city-wide ministerial team that spent several years developing a program that would provide transitional housing for single mothers. In both cases, church members were responding to basic needs for safety and shelter that they recognized must be met before students could be expected to excel in school, and the commitments were made from

a sense of recognizing the need to be a strong presence in their communities to support the schools and their students.

Success and Failures

Keys to success

Leadership on both sides

As was discussed previously, successful congregation-school partnerships depend on program coordinators in both the school and church or synagogue settings. In all of the partnerships that we learned about, the program coordinator on the school side was a school employee, most commonly a school counselor or social worker, and in some cases an administrator or secretary. The closer this coordinator was to the students and their families, the more effective he or she was. The social workers in this role seemed to be the most successful, likely because they had the professional access and ability to discuss contextual issues with students and their families, and were therefore positioned to have a pulse on students' needs.

In one instance, a social worker we learned about contacted the church with which her school was partnered during the summer, surprising the church coordinator since school was not in session. One of the school families had contacted her after a family tragedy, seeking resources. In addition to connecting the family with several community resources, the social worker reached out to the church seeking assistance with needed clothing and furniture. When asked why she was working during her summer break, the social worker replied, "God never quits," and explained that families' needs are often greater over the summer when there are no school lunches to feed the children, and daytime child care becomes an issue for working parents, so she stays connected to families over the summer to continue to work with families. In this case, and in several others that we heard of, the school coordinator clearly conceptualized her relationship with the students as having fairly loose boundaries,

a characteristic that was true of some congregational coordinators as well.

In the case of the church coordinator of an after-school college preparation program for high school students that we spoke with, contact with families was a regular occurrence. This coordinator visited the family of each of the dozens of students in her program at least once each year to help educate them about the college application process, as well as to stay in contact with them to work as a partner with them to help support the student in the high school setting. She directly commented that her boundaries between herself and the families of her students are very weak, which makes her job emotionally difficult at times, but at other times very rewarding, as she is able to celebrate with families when she attends former students' college graduations, wedding ceremonies, and the baptisms of their own children.

Another church coordinator told a story of breaking her foot on the day an all-school meal was planned at her partner school, so she recounted being on the phone in the ambulance and in the ER finding people to cover all of the details necessary to make sure the dinner would still happen. She explained that the dinner was to be an important community-building event for the school's families, and helping them meet that goal was important to her, that she couldn't let it go. Another coordinator from a Methodist church that we learned about felt so strongly about the potential of congregation-school partnerships that he made it his mission to work with leaders from all of the other Methodists in a fairly wide region to help them develop their own partnership, and he was largely successful. It cannot be stated strongly enough that having a strong and engaged leader in a coordinating position in both the school and the congregation setting is the clearest and most significant predictor of success for the programs that we learned about.

Organic evolution

When asked what advice they would give to other congregation-school partnerships, quite a few synagogue and church leaders said that it is important to know that their own partner-

ships started off slowly and grew over time. Congregation members had to gain the trust of school personnel, who were at times suspicious about the motivations behind such partnerships. Quite a few congregational representatives explicitly said that the key to maintaining successful relationships is to listen to school leaders to learn what needs can be met rather than coming to the partnership with a plan for how to help the school or assumptions about the school's needs or deficiencies. One rabbi described this approach as meeting the actual needs rather than "going after the sexy ways to get involved," likely referring to volunteering to scrub floors (which volunteers from this synagogue did) rather than hosting parties and the like. Such an approach helped congregations most directly meet needs, but also contributed to the establishment of trust between groups, given that synagogue and church members were responding to school requests rather than coming in with an agenda.

Connection between congregation mission and project

One pattern that emerged from discussions with congregation leaders was that the clearer the connection between the congregation's missional goals and the aims of the school project, the greater the investment, and the greater the chances for success. When synagogue and church volunteers were able to connect their work with schools to a religious or spiritual tenet or creed (showing compassion, helping the poor, seeking justice, loving kindness, demonstrating love, etc.), they conceptualized their time spent meeting with students, cleaning the teacher's lounge, assisting the school nurse, baking, raking, driving, shopping, cross-guarding, etc. as an extension of their faith, in addition to a way to support local families and improve students' changes of academic success. In fact, several clergy members were clear that they were thankful for the opportunity to be involved with schools, as this direct engagement with students and their families gave some congregants new perspective into the lives of their neighbors, and opened up avenues for new and fruitful ways to talk about justice, compassion, service, love, etc. In this way, most congregational leaders we talked to said

that for all for the work being done to help schools, the volunteers felt that they were benefiting more from the partnership than they were contributing.

In fact, in many cases, congregational representatives were emphatic that the partnerships had become part of the identity of the church or synagogue. A great majority of congregants found some way to become involved, if not through direct contact with students and school personnel, then in purchasing supplies, clothes, and other material resources, providing food for events or classroom snacks, supporting Christmas gift drives, and many other ways. One church developed a pen pal program between elementary students and elderly members of the congregation who wanted to be involved but had limited or constrained resources. This program was mutually beneficial for the students and their pen pals, providing both academic and social support for the students, and social connection for church members. Several congregational representatives discussed the schools and their students as "ours" – our kids, our school, our teachers – and reported that congregants felt a real and important sense of connection. In one synagogue, students collectively created works of art (such as banners and mosaics) to give to the congregation as a gift of gratitude for their support. These felt and tile art pieces may not match the formal and refined aesthetic with which the building is decorated, but still they very prominently adorn one of the main hallways, and synagogue members are proud and happy to have them on display.

Quite a few of the coordinators discussed the deep and lasting impressions that students made on volunteers who tutored or otherwise worked with students on an ongoing, regular basis, and many emotional stories were shared about connections made, including one mentor who helped a family organize (and fund) an early quinceiera celebration for a girl suffering from cancer who the doctors correctly predicted wouldn't live to her 15th birthday. Another told of an elderly widower who had made a close connection with a young boy whose family had to move out of the area suddenly, and how upset the gentleman was at losing the connection, and how worried he was about the boy. The congregation leaders we spoke with

made it clear that these and the other volunteers we heard about felt that although they never once mentioned religion, doctrinal ideas, or God in their communication with students, that they were fulfilling a spiritual purpose in their time spent with their young partners.

It should also be noted that we spoke with coordinators from two Evangelical Protestant churches in the South. They were the only two congregations to say that part of the objective in forming and sustaining partnerships with schools was having the ability to present the gospel message to students and their families. Religious instruction was not a part of any of the activities that took place on the school campus, but these churches were keen to organize activities that would bring students and/or their parents to the church. For instance, one church collected Christmas gifts for dozens and dozens of families each year. The church invited parents to the church to select and wrap gifts for their children, but attendance at a worship service was required before gifts were distributed. One church representative said, "Any time they walk in the church doors, we want them to hear the gospel."

What's not required

None of the congregations we talked to were huge. Some had only a couple hundred members, while the largest had 700 or 800. Certainly the larger the congregation, the greater the pool of resources from which to draw for the partnership, but congregational representatives at smaller churches and synagogues said very clearly that not all congregations can sustain massive programs, but all could do something, so great was the need in public schools. In addition, while some congregations contributed large amounts of financial resources (such as the church that funded the school social worker's job for two years, and another that ran a comprehensive after-school tutoring and college prep program), some invested very little money. In fact, some partnerships drew no financial resources from the church, but relied instead on occasional donations from congregants of school supplies, underwear and socks, or baked goods. In fact, one church pastor said that being able to contribute in these ways

made congregants feel invested in projects in a way that they might not have, given a large-scale, very well-funded project, within which a package of socks might not seem like a very significant contribution. In every single case, school administrators, teachers, students, and their families responded with gratitude to the help they received from their congregational partners, demonstrating that no form of engagement is insignificant.

Common challenges

Turnover

Consistency in coordination of activities was critical in the partnerships that we learned about. Very often partnerships were successful precisely because of the personality and motivation of the particular school and congregational leaders who managed them, and when these leaders left via retirement, funding cuts, burn out, and death, partnerships faltered, even in the presence of another facilitator who was interested in seeing the program continue but lacking the enthusiasm the previous leader had. Or, if a similarly-minded coordinator could be found to fill the position, it seems that there was a period during which trust had to be rebuilt as the new coordinator established his or her relationship with school personnel. It is for this reason that Kids Hope USA suggests that congregations recruit two leaders, which avoids having all of the responsibility of maintaining the partnership on one person's shoulders, potentially mitigating burnout, and ensures continuity of the program in the event of the short or long-term absence of one leader.

Similarly, the loss of an engaged school representative was fatal in a couple of situations. In many cases, the objectives of congregation-school partnerships coincide very well with the job responsibilities and concerns of school counselors and social workers, making their involvement in such projects natural and easy. In their absence, teachers and other school administrators who may be very interested in seeing the partnership continue may not have the resources and skills to facilitate the partnership the way a counselor and social worker

could. Recognizing this, as well as the significant and meaningful role played in one school by the social worker, one Protestant church, upon learning that funding for the school social worker would be cut, collected $50,000 in donations from church members in just two months in order to fund the position for the upcoming year. When the position was threatened again two years later, the congregation again raised the necessary $30,000 to keep the social worker at the school. Eventually the administration could no longer keep the position, regardless of contributions from the church, and the partnership suffered mightily once the social worker was out of the picture, as church leaders had feared. In addition, a principal change in a school could disrupt or even derail a partnership, sometimes due to concerns about churches' motivations for proselytizing or a more general reticence to allow outside influence into the operation of the school. The pastor of an Evangelical Protestant church that we spoke to said that his program's greatest need was help navigating the relationship between the project and school administrators and teachers, because without engagement from administrators, his once strong project had stalled after a change in school leadership.

Volunteer recruitment

Although we found that all congregation-school partnerships had strong and consistent support from their congregations which allowed them to meet just about every need presented to them from the schools, congregations did, at times, struggle to meet the demand for in-person volunteers to work with students, particularly in mentoring and tutoring roles that generally required consistent weekly (or more often) school-hours availability. It was often only retired congregants and others who have fairly flexible schedules who were able to commit to this type of involvement. For example, one school expressed interest in having the church form an after-school running club for students. Several church members were willing and able to help in this way, but couldn't regularly commit to being at the school in the after-school time frame, and the volunteers available to help at that time were unable to facilitate such

a club. There were quite a few opportunities for volunteers who work full-time schedules to help with (coordinating evening and weekend events, donating clothes, food, and other goods for students, providing learning materials for classrooms, etc.), but the majority of the direct relationship building with students was done by volunteers with flexible schedules, primarily those who were retired or not working.

Further, we heard from quite a few coordinators who faced reticence from potential volunteers who didn't think that they had anything to offer because they weren't teachers or hadn't had experience working with children. Likewise, some were anxious about working with students of a different race and/or socioeconomic status than themselves. One such (white, upper middle class) initially hesitant volunteer commented, after becoming a mentor despite her misgivings, that she hadn't even realized before the partnership began that there were Hispanics in the church's neighborhood, and hadn't wanted to, but that given her level of involvement in the lives of the students she had worked with, she now "can't imagine my life without them." Therefore, coordinators found that if they could get volunteers involved in the first place, many of them found their place in the program (or worked in their own "season" as one minster put it).

Finally, as is likely the case in any program that relies on volunteer labor, burnout is a problem that some programs face, particularly when volunteers are working with students from very difficult circumstances, as both the time commitment and emotional investment take their toll. To combat this, one church partnered each mentor and tutor who worked directly with students with a prayer partner at the church with whom he or she could debrief or discuss concerns, and two other churches employed or had on retainer a psychologist with whom volunteers could discuss issues and concerns.

Commitment from pastor

Several congregational representatives indicated that a lack of support from the pastor or rabbi inhibited the potential of the congregation-school partnership. Although these programs operated on a day-to-day basis fairly independently of clergy involvement, buy-in from the minister at the inception of the relationship was important to galvanize congregational support and investment, as well as to provide, in some cases, guidance on the link between program activities and goals and tenets of Jewish or Christian faith to illustrate the overlap. It was also sometimes meaningful for the request for congregants to consider becoming involved in the partnership to come from clergy members to help entice participation but also to lend credence to the idea that those asked have the skills necessary to fill such a role.

Shallow administrative oversight

As discussed previously, having engaged and enthusiastic leadership in place at both the school and the congregation seems to be a critical factor in the success of these partnerships, and the strength of the program varied directly with the engagement of the people in these roles. Congregations that lacked such leaders were operating in a more pragmatic than engaged manner, collecting and delivering donations or hosting a Christmas gift drive rather than engaging personally with students and their individual needs. It's not possible to know if such partnerships would have developed more fully with more engaged congregational leaders (or if, instead, the leader in place was constrained by the program that was operating at the capacity for what either the congregation and/or the school would tolerate), but this seems to be the likely conclusion.

Conclusions

The primary lesson learned from discussions with synagogue and church representatives about their partnerships with public schools is that the potential for meaningful impact on

schools and the lives of their students is significant. While it is true that some of the partnerships described in this report have built extensive, very well-resourced programs, it is certainly not the case that small or moderately-funded congregations can't have an impact, particularly given the tremendous need faced by school communities, particularly those in low-income neighborhoods. None of the partnerships described here started out large in scope. Rather, they began with a few volunteers reading with students, a delivery of winter coats, or another manageable task. Many coordinators discussed the slow nature in which partnerships grew as trust was gained, relationships were formed, volunteers' skills were cultivated, and needs at schools intensified. Further, it was very clear from our discussions that allowing school personnel to set the agenda for partnerships facilitated a smooth relationship, and ensured that the greatest needs were met, when possible.

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson learned was that the congregation-school partnerships that enjoyed great longevity were successful in part because of their mutually-beneficial nature. Congregations were contributing in meaningful ways to the lives of students in almost every way conceivable, but congregation members and volunteers benefitted as well, both in terms of the cultivation of relationships with students and their families, but also in a deepening of their understanding of the importance of service to others, great realization about the needs and conditions of the poor in the United States, and ways in which their faith could be made manifest through the development of relationships with members of local school communities.