



Working Together: How Collaborations and Partnerships Can Support Healthy Schools

The value of successful “cross-cutting” collaborations has been a core belief and a founding operating principle of Action for Healthy Kids since its inception — visible in our numerous national partnerships. Success in the journey toward school wellness can be advanced when like-minded organizations join forces. That’s why Action for Healthy Kids Teams frequently participate in partnerships, collaborations, and alliances with other school wellness-oriented associations and organizations whose missions cover a range of education-, health-, fitness-, and nutrition-related concerns. The efficiencies created through this kind of teamwork can work to the benefit of all – the shared goal, of course, being the creation of healthier learning environments for students.

This field report profiles collaborations of various sorts in three different states.

- > In **Kentucky**, the Action for Healthy Kids Team formed a relationship with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-approved state obesity program, the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky.
- > Action for Healthy Kids’ **Florida** Team formed successful partnerships with local hospitals and a renowned classroom health-education program known as More Health, Inc.
- > In **California**, the Action for Healthy Kids Team is working closely with both California Project LEAN and the California School Boards Association in assisting schools with long-term implementation and assessment of local wellness policies.

Importantly, Action for Healthy Kids’ commitment to collaborations isn’t restricted to state- and national-level partnerships. Local and grassroots efforts are equally important, and Teams are actively working on these types of associations – to help drive and support change at the school building, district, and community levels. Such efforts will be a focus of an upcoming Field Report.

[STATE PROFILES > >](#)

Kentucky

TWO KNOWLEDGEABLE ORGANIZATIONS, ONE WORTHY GOAL

“Partnerships and collaborations are all about leveraging the resources to which you have access, and just plain cooperating,” says Jackie Walters, of Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids. She is referring to her Team’s close work with the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky.

In 2003, the Kentucky Department of Public Health was awarded a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) grant to implement nutrition and physical activity interventions to decrease obesity and other chronic diseases through local groups such as the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky. Kentucky was one of 28 states to receive this funding, which focused on Kentuckians of all ages.

Since schools reach children and youth, that venue was the focus of much interest on the part of the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky, which immediately reached out to Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids.

In this particular collaboration, the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky sought out Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids precisely because it was eager to further the cause of school wellness policy implementation and monitoring in Kentucky. The alliance was a success for Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids as well since it allowed the Kentucky Team to expand its network of volunteers across the state through connections offered by the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky.

This collaboration resulted in everything from the hosting of mini-conferences on local wellness policies to helping launch local *ReCharge! Energizing After-school* programs. In fact, as a direct result of this effort, *ReCharge!* trainings were made possible in six different Kentucky counties — Lyon, Davies, McCracken, Franklin, Boone, and McLean — involving nearly 100 participants and the placement of 36 program kits.

Money to support the effort came to Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids through the national Action for Healthy Kids’ Team Grant Program. But how do such collaborations actually occur?

“You know,” Jackie Walters points out, “in states like Kentucky, there’s an incredible amount of overlap in terms of personnel. In the health and wellness fields, particularly, a lot of us have been working on the same issues from within various agencies. Some of us have jumped from agency to agency; we all show up at the same meetings and conferences; and we tend to have kind of a working relationship anyway. So the forming of associations and collaborations, when the time is right, isn’t that big a leap.”

Walters, not only co-chair of Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids but a nutrition education program specialist for the University of Kentucky, observes that, when your partnership involves working within the context of a larger effort, you have to be cognizant of what the larger goals are — and be vigilant about making sure your activities are consistent.

“We have to be very aware, and always keep in mind,” she says, “that the school-venue aspect is just one facet of the larger CDC grant, albeit an important and very active piece. Within this CDC grant to the Partnership for a Fit

Kentucky, there are groups focusing on community health, on workplace health, on breastfeeding, on any number of health- and wellness-related topics. Ours happens to be the school piece. And part of functioning well within a collaboration is being aware of the larger structure, and being sensitive to it.”

How has the association worked in Walters’ view?

“A lot of our success,” she says, “is based on respect. And also on the fact that we fleshed out roles and goals up front. Also, when anyone gets their toes stepped on, we try to mend fences immediately, and never let things build up.”

SHARING VISION, AVOIDING CONFLICT

Walters’ good feelings are echoed by Elaine Russell of the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky. Russell is a nutrition services coordinator within the state’s Obesity Prevention Program.

“In fighting obesity,” Russell says, “schools are a top priority for us, so an association with Action for Healthy Kids here was almost a given.”

“We’re pretty lucky here in Kentucky,” Russell continues. “We haven’t had many turf wars or spats about territory. Frankly, we want each of the organizations that we’re working with — like Action for Healthy Kids — to take credit for whatever gets done. We see ourselves at the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky as kind of a clearinghouse, seeking out groups that can do things best. And, when it comes to school wellness, that’s Action for Healthy Kids.”

Russell echoes Jackie Walters’ observation about the overlap in, and general familiarity of, health and wellness personnel in Kentucky.

“It’s funny, even if you change jobs here, chances are you stay within the same work group — that’s how closely we all work together. You might be at the Department of Public Health, or the Cooperative Extension Office, or the Department of Education, but you find yourself working with the same,

Key Points About Collaboration and Partnerships

- The point of collaborating is to leverage resources, time, money, and effort.
- Collaborations can be fruitful in any field where there is overlap between and among organizations in terms of activities, goals, and vision.
- When working in a collaborative venture, remember that you’re now just one part of a larger whole — this can impact positioning, communication, and level of independence.
- As in a personal relationship, respect, trust, and openness are key elements in a successful partnership or collaboration.
- Defining responsibilities and expectations with a potential partner up-front is vitally important.
- Conflicts and competition will arise, and compromise is almost always the answer.
- In the best partnerships and collaborations, each individual partner ends up feeling that it’s getting more than it’s giving.
- In the nonprofit arena, funders and grantors look favorably upon collaborations and affiliations between and among organizations.
- When proposing a partnership, go to the top of an organization first for senior-level buy-in. Build relationships with several top people for continuity if there’s a leadership transition.
- Sometimes a partnership on a finite, specific, single project can be preferable to a vague, open-ended “affiliation.”
- When a partnership has stopped being fruitful, define the successes you’ve had and then bring it to an end.
- The “organizational ego” always needs care and feeding. Allowing individual members within a collaboration to take credit is important.

committed group of people over and over. We've all known each other for a long time. We all tend to have a history together. That makes partnerships more natural."

Are there conflicts within the collaboration?

"Of course," acknowledges Russell, "as there are in anything. In getting Kentucky's no-junk-food legislation passed in 2005, we had lots of disagreements. The Department of Education wasn't pleased with wording. Personalities came into play. But you just work it out. You make compromises. The other thing you have to be cognizant of is consistency of message. When you have different organizations with differing agendas working on the same project and coming at it from different angles, you're constantly asking yourself, 'Okay, what is the message here? What are we doing, and why are we doing it?' You're always trying to stay focused on the task at hand — which a collaboration among several organizations can sometimes, unfortunately, muddle."

And what about credit?

"As far as I'm concerned, it's a non-issue," says Russell. "Sure, there are times you think as you're working on something, 'Am I wearing my Partnership for a Fit Kentucky hat, or my Action for Healthy Kids hat?' But we're thrilled for Action for Healthy Kids to have its own identity within the grant, and do what they do best, which is wellness within the school venue."

The Action for Healthy Kids/Partnership for a Fit Kentucky collaboration is already beginning to reap the benefits. It has enabled the Team to expand its reach into more diverse communities with underserved populations, especially on the regional and community level.

Florida

COLLABORATIONS OPEN DOORS

"One thing I've noticed is that when organizations work in collaboration, doors seem to open more easily. A coalition of organizations working together is perceived, somehow, as more neutral, less agenda-driven, than a single organization working alone. There's a 'neutralizing' effect created when organizations work together that helps to dispel suspicion, and creates almost a kind of enhanced credibility."

Florida Action for Healthy Kids Chair Lisa Creswell is describing her Team's collaboration with More Health, Inc., the American Heart Association, of which Creswell is a Florida-chapter staff member, and local hospitals. More Health, Inc. began as a project of the Junior League of Tampa, developed to promote health, safety, and injury prevention education for school-aged children through a series of 24 hands-on, in-classroom lessons. Because of its success, the initiative is now underwritten by Tampa General Hospital. In Hillsborough County public and private schools, More Health taught 138,000 students in grades K-12 during the 2006-07 school year.

"More Health was a very natural fit for us," Creswell says, "not only because of our shared concerns and common goals, but because of their amazing access and effectiveness in the classroom."

The collaboration in question was the organizing and staging of a "Week

of Wellness” in Hillsborough County schools, to build awareness and further implementation of the district’s local wellness policy.

“The way it worked,” Creswell says, “is that each organization brought something different to the table, and it was all combined in a week of informative and effective presentations and activities.”

Specifically, More Health, Inc. brought its expertise in in-classroom teaching of wellness topics to kids, teachers, and parents. The American Heart Association brought the obesity-fighting expertise and resources — both materials and speakers — of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, courtesy of its affiliation with the William J. Clinton Foundation. And Florida Action for Healthy Kids contributed activities and presentations that included Action for Healthy Kids’ popular Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge and the appearance of a celebrity chef who taught kids to make healthy “gourmet snacks” — one of the highlights of the week.

Speaking with her American Heart Association hat on, Lisa Creswell stresses, “We were particularly pleased to involve the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, whose purpose, programs, and goals so clearly complement those of Action for Healthy Kids, and with whom collaboration can be so beneficial, given the Alliance’s resources and visibility.”

Creswell makes the point that the efficiencies created by organizations collaborating with one another is vitally important in a time when resources are extremely limited and everyone’s available time is stretched to the limit. But to her, the most important point to be made about partnerships and collaborations is listening.

“Sitting down with a group to discuss a possible association or collaboration, the temptation is to talk about yourself, and to ‘sell.’ However, it’s much more important to just listen. Find out what the organization’s goals and objectives are. Listen to their needs. Find out where they’re coming from, build some trust, and get the relationship off to a good start. Don’t try to make it all about you. Only when you really listen can you know if another group’s goals and objectives truly align with your own, and if there’s a genuine fit.”

IT’S MORE IMPORTANT TO COLLABORATE NOW THAN EVER

Karen Pesce heads up More Health, which since 1992 has been sponsored by Tampa General Hospital in Hillsborough County and since 1995 by All Children’s Hospital in Pinellas County (St. Petersburg/Clearwater). Pesce also now serves as co-chair, with Lisa Creswell, of Florida Action for Healthy Kids.

“I was invited to the very first meeting of Florida Action for Healthy Kids in 2002,” Pesce recalls, “which was really fortunate, since our relationship started early. It made such sense for us to incorporate information and guidance on the importance of school wellness into More Health’s classroom lessons.”

Pesce seconds Lisa Creswell’s contention that collaborations are more important now than ever.

“Whatever the project,” Pesce maintains, “collaboration is the only way to go now. It’s not optional anymore. Community partners of all kinds simply

have to pull together to really maximize all of their mutual resources – and to make sure that they’re not duplicating each other’s efforts out in the field, and wasting time, energy, and money. Funding is so limited that we just can’t afford the luxury of waste and duplication.”

Speaking of funding, Pesce makes a sometimes forgotten point — that collaborations can be key to successful grant applications.

“Anybody who works in this field — or for that matter any nonprofit field — knows that grantors and funders of various kinds like collaborations. In fact, some of them demand it. Our experience is that you have a much better chance of successfully securing grant monies when you approach the funding source as a consortium of groups working together, rather than as a single group with a single project. Funders get really excited about that, because it tells them that you’re attacking a problem from several different viewpoints, you’re reaching out for different kinds of expertise, you’re actively pulling in partners who can do what you can’t, and you’re making an initiative all the more likely to succeed. Collaborations are a huge benefit when it comes to raising money.”

What about competition among collaboration partners? Pesce downplays the notion.

“Sure, it happens. But, if you’ve got true collaboration, you don’t have competition. In a true collaboration, everyone respects each other’s expertise, and allows that person to do what they do best.”

UNDER-THE-RADAR COLLABORATIONS

Jennifer Whittaker is the school marketing director for Dairy Farmers, Inc., and a Florida Action for Healthy Kids Team member. She makes the important point that there’s a lot of inter-group collaboration happening, as she puts it, “behind the scenes.”

How so?

“Florida is a large state with a diverse population, and we’re constantly finding that little mini-collaborations are going on at the grassroots, or unofficial, level. You’ll be working on a project and suddenly you’ll discover that some local recreational group, or dance or fitness or dietary organization, has made inroads on which you can piggyback, or from which you can benefit.

Whittaker makes the observation that many Action for Healthy Kids Team members — not just in Florida but in other states — have “day jobs” with organizations that are natural fits for partnerships on projects of all kinds. Those connections are, of course, invaluable. But what about when you don’t have an “in” with an organization that looks, from the outside, like a good partner?

“My experience is that you need to go right to the top of an organization with whom you want to collaborate,” Whittaker responds. “Make a personal phone call. Follow up with an e-mail. Reference the Action for Healthy Kids website, which is an impressive information source, not to mention a source of credibility. Be passionate about what you want to do together and how you see it coming together — and then sit down together and discuss the details. Make sure you have several top people there, too, because so many organizations have rotating presi-

dents and chairpeople, and you want some continuity when a top person leaves.”
 Does it always work?
 Says Whittaker, “All I can tell you is that we have honestly never once been rejected by an organization whose support we sought. We may not have always engaged them at the level we hoped, but we’ve always been successful at convincing prospective partners and collaborators that there’s a whole lot we can do for each other. Because there almost always is.”

California

COLLABORATING ON A CONFERENCE

California Action for Healthy Kids worked closely with California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) and the California School Boards Association to organize and deliver the California School Wellness Conference. The Conference, held in Anaheim in October of 2007, represented a groundbreaking statewide effort to improve the learning environments and promote healthy eating and physical education for public school children in California. The conference theme was the changing school food environment, and the gathering was intended to equip schools with tools and information necessary for long-term implementation and assessment of their local wellness policies.

California Action for Healthy Kids Team member Peggy Agron observes that “a principal value of collaboration on a complex topic like school wellness is the more groups you collaborate with, the more you’re guaranteed to get your message out to as many people as possible.” Get the word out indeed: Agron initially estimated conference attendance at 300 to 500, but ended up turning away attendees at the 1,200 mark. The second such conference is scheduled for October 6-7, 2009, also in Anaheim.

“To me,” Agron says, “the single most important element in collaborating with other organizations is to have the heads of the organization – the top people – on board. That’s the only way you’re really assured you’ve got genuine buy-in.”

Agron says that she depends on collaborations to ensure that different, often contrasting, perspectives on the same topic are brought to the table. She also notes that varying the groups involved, whose concerns overlap but aren’t identical, helps to make certain that whatever the issue is at hand – be it school wellness or anything else – it is perceived as emanating from a “community of stakeholders,” and is not just the agenda of one group.

“In the end,” Agron says, “I tend to gravitate toward collaborating with people whom I trust, and understand – and who trust me. That means, of course, that relationship-building is a necessary precursor to even considering a collaboration. Also, I tend to like to work with people who are different in temperament from me – I tend to be a glass-half-empty person, and I like collaborating with glass-half-full folks!”

California Action for Healthy Kids’ Martin Gonzalez is assistant executive director for governance and policy services for the California School Boards Association (CSBA). He warns, “When a collaboration is done right, you can certainly accomplish more together than individual organizations can alone. But

when it's done wrong, you risk not accomplishing even half of what you could have done by yourself.

"When you're working in an area like school wellness or childhood obesity," says Gonzalez, "you learn very quickly that there is a need for partners — others who understand the problem and provide varying levels of support. No one organization or group can do it alone. The problem is just too huge, with too many facets."

Gonzalez points out that, in a veritable symphony of organizational collaboration, more than 50 groups and associations came together to produce the above-mentioned California School Wellness Conference, including the state's Department of Education and Department of Public Health, and the American Cancer Society.

"It all started from a shared vision," states Gonzalez, "and an agreed-upon mission. There was a mutual recognition that the goals were worthy enough to accomplish. And I think one of the reasons the collaboration necessary to produce the California School Wellness Conference was successful was that it was focused and finite. We had a single task to accomplish, with a beginning and an end. Somehow, in my experience, it seems that those kinds of collaborations are easier and more fruitful than vague, open-ended alliances."

Gonzalez characterizes a successful partnership as one in which you feel as though you are getting as much as — or more than — you give.

"Once a single partner in a collaboration starts to feel shortchanged, there's a problem," he warns. "The minute you feel put-upon, or resentful, there's an imbalance that you have to look at. An unequal partnership is worse than no partnership at all."

Collaboration: A Way of Organizational Life

Collaborations, partnerships, and joint projects have been a part of Action for Healthy Kids' approach since the organization's founding in 2002. Coalition-building and the concurrent sharing of responsibilities — and rewards — is very much an Action for Healthy Kids operating principle, practiced successfully by Teams across the country. Some recent examples at right:

Information on many of the Team projects and collaborations cited at right are featured in Action for Healthy Kids field reports which are available for download at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

Colorado Team: Worked closely with YMCA of Metropolitan Denver to bring *ReCharge! Energizing After-School* into existing after-school programs. *ReCharge!* is an after-school curriculum, jointly developed by Action for Healthy Kids and the National Football League, that helps students in grades 3 to 6 learn about and practice good nutrition and physical activity habits.

Indiana Team: Worked through the Indiana Department of Education to formulate and coordinate its statewide Healthy Hoosier School Award program.

Massachusetts Team: Partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Education, the New England Dairy and Food Council, and the Harvard Prevention Research Center to reach

out to high-school students and launch its Students Taking Charge campaign for improving school wellness.

Montana Team: Partnered with Eat Right Montana, a local nutrition-focused nonprofit organization, in a multi-tiered outreach to parent organizations (PTAs and PTOs) statewide.

Ohio Team: Worked closely with the Ohio Children's Hunger Alliance in a social marketing effort aimed at educating districts about the importance, and practical feasibility, of school breakfast.

Pennsylvania Team: Collaborated with Project PA — itself the result of a collaboration between Penn State University and the Pennsylvania Department of Education — to distribute a nutrition-information toolkit as part of its parent-outreach efforts.



Action for Healthy Kids.

Action for Healthy Kids® is a national nonprofit organization that addresses the epidemic of overweight, undernourished, and sedentary youth by focusing on improving nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in schools. This grassroots public-private partnership of 60 organizations and government agencies supports the efforts of Teams — comprised of more than 10,000 volunteers — in all states and the District of Columbia.

Action for Healthy Kids was founded in 2002 by former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, in response to the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, which identified the school environment as one of five key sites of change. To learn more, visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

Plus, what Gonzalez calls “the organizational ego” is always a consideration. “The organizational ego has to be cared for and fed,” he half-jokes. “In that regard, who gets credit, and recognition, is important. In our case, the questions we had to ask were, Okay, whose conference is this? Who is the ‘sponsor’ and who’s the ‘owner’? Who’s on the letterhead? It can sound trivial, but it isn’t. Anybody in a collaboration, especially a collaboration aimed at producing a visible and hopefully celebrated event, recognizes that this stuff needs to happen. The larger and more visible the project, the higher the stakes.”

Gonzalez, like Action for Healthy Kids colleagues on other Teams, mentions trust as a key component in any collaboration.

“If you’re suspect of, or competitive with, the people you’re working with,” he says, “you’re headed toward failure. And having trust doesn’t mean you shouldn’t define responsibilities, discuss expectations, and compare assumptions. On the contrary, you need to be as specific as possible up front about what you expect from the partnership or collaboration. Then the trust kicks in.”

ORGANIZATIONS ARE LIKE PEOPLE

The analogy of human relationships to organizational collaborations is one that Martin Gonzalez draws easily.

“Collaborations are very akin to relationships among people,” he observes, “in the sense that you’re learning about each other over time, and you adjust. You start out knowing next to nothing about each other, and you build on that. In collaborating on the California School Wellness Conference, we had a very analogous thing going on. Education folks were learning about the concerns of health professionals, and vice-versa. Each group has its strategies, messages, tactics, and concerns — and each has to be sensitive to, and learn from, the other.”

Has Gonzalez ever abandoned a collaboration?

“No, but I’ve wanted to,” he says honestly. “Here’s the thing. If a collaboration has ceased to be fruitful, I’d rather simply define and accept the successes we did have, and then move on. If an association or affiliation has stopped making sense, stopped producing results, you should by all means keep the lines of communication open. But bring the formal collaboration to an end if it can’t be re-ignited.”

Referring to the school-wellness field specifically, Gonzalez says that there are so many different organizations with shared interests and commitments that the opportunities for collaboration are incredibly rich.

“But when you find yourself in a room with people who have a shared vision, common goals, and a belief that they can and should work together, there’s no better feeling. It’s very empowering. And when that happens, the probability is that you’ll accomplish more than you even imagined you could.”