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## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Strategies for public school  
and faith-based leaders  
building partnerships for  
student success

A persistent achievement gap plagues U.S. public schools. An achievement gap occurs “when one group of students (such as, students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (that is, larger than the margin of error),” according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) ([nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/](https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/)). For example, African-American eighth grade students scored 31 points lower, on average, than did white students on an NAEP mathematics assessment and 26 points lower in Reading. NAEP reports, “White students ... had higher scores than Black students, on average, on all assessments.”

Cross-sector collaboration provides one avenue to improving the services of public schools, rallying partners and their resources around acute student needs and, optimally,

altering the paths of students' academic and personal lives, as well as the community's well being. In their article, "Supporting African American Student Success Through Prophetic Activism: New Possibilities for Public School-Church Partnerships" ([journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0042085914566098](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0042085914566098)), recently published in *Urban Education*, Diedria H. Jordan, Program Specialist at Guilford County Schools, and Camille M. Wilson, Associate Professor of Educational Studies at the University of Michigan, offer recommended partnership strategies for church and public education leaders — including school principals, counselors, teachers, senior pastors, youth pastors, and parents — to promote learning and academic achievement among African-American youth.

Jordan and Wilson present findings from case studies of two Black churches in central North Carolina partnering with public schools to provide services to students. One church collaborated with the local school district to offer assistance to all suspended students from a nearby public high school — regardless of church membership status or race — to stay current with school assignments. In this successful partnership, the church provided adult mentors and use of the facility and utilities free of charge, teachers created work packets for students, and the school obtained grant funding to pay for one full-time and one part-time position to coordinate the program. Many of the students who participated in the program were never suspended again, Jordan shared in a call with The Intersector Project. The second church's partnerships included school supplies drives and other initiatives.

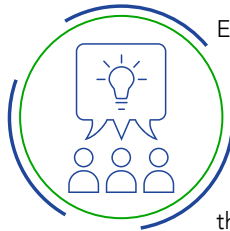
Jordan and Wilson's research included interviews and focus groups with church pastors, ministry coordinators, educational directors, parents, and youth linked to the educational activities, church

observations, and review of relevant documents. The following takeaways will be of interest to leaders engaged

in planning and implementing partnerships between faith-based organizations and public schools.

# TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

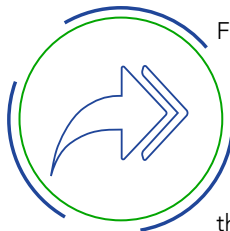
**SCHOOL STAFF, WHO MAY BE CONNECTED TO THE COMMUNITY THROUGH MEMBERSHIP IN CIVIC OR FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, CAN OFFER A WEALTH OF EXISTING NETWORKS FOR POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS.**



Educators have the opportunity to serve as a bridge between their school and their community. School staff may have not only affiliations with faith-based organizations whose resources and goals might align with school needs, but they may also be members of civic organizations like bowling clubs, sororities, or fraternities, which could provide additional assistance to the school, Jordan noted. "If you know your employees, that's how you extend your community," she shared. Typically, a school leader is more comfortable when someone from their staff suggests a partnership with a faith-based organization with which they have an affiliation and a rapport with church leaders.

- School staff members who want to assess whether their connection with a faith-based or community organization could result in a successful partnership can refer to Table 9.4: A Partnership Planning Checklist in the Ohio Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement document on Community Partnerships ([education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/Family-and-Community-Engagement/Models-for-Family-and-Community-Engagement/Community-Partnerships.pdf.aspx](https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/Family-and-Community-Engagement/Models-for-Family-and-Community-Engagement/Community-Partnerships.pdf.aspx)).

**DETERMINE WHAT TYPE OF PROGRAM BEST SUITS PARTNERS' GOALS AND AT WHAT SCALE THE PROGRAM WILL BE IMPLEMENTED BEFORE INITIATING A PARTNERSHIP.**



Faith-based organizations should consider what impact they want to have on their community before partnering with schools. For example, a faith-based organization with close ties to a particular school may be aware of a particularly needed service and want to implement that service for that school's population, as in the program supporting suspended students that the authors studied. On the other hand, some faith-based organizations may want to get involved on a larger scale and provide services or supplies to many schools within a district. School leaders can bring an awareness of resources needed to meet their school's goals, and through dialogue with faith-based organization leaders, can identify points of synergy for successful collaborative programs. While church-school partnerships can help students succeed, Jordan and Wilson note, "It is just essential that faith-based groups not promote religious doctrine or infringe on the civil rights of public school community members."

# TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS (CONT.)

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- Partners can see The Mapping the Collaborative Journey discussion in Evaluating Collaboratives: Reaching the Potential ([learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/G3658-8.PDF](https://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/G3658-8.PDF)), which walks partners through the process of creating a logically linked sequence of change that articulates a relationship between the collaboration's work and the results and impact it hopes to achieve (found on pages 22-30) to aid in their choice of programming.

## HAVE HONEST DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE RESOURCES NEEDED FOR THE COLLABORATION TO SUCCEED AND THE RESOURCES THAT EACH PARTNER IS REALISTICALLY ABLE TO GIVE TO THE COLLABORATION.



While some churches may have fairly extensive financial and non-financial resources to share with schools, many will not. Regarding non-financial resources, churches should be careful not to overcommit: "Understanding that Black churches are volunteer institutions, Black church leaders have to ensure that their prophetic endeavors do not overwhelm the volunteers who will be responsible for their operation," the article explains.

Schools should also be open about what it is they're hoping to get from the partnership. If a faith-based organization interested in partnership doesn't have financial resources to give, school leaders should ask themselves what non-financial resources can be gained from the partnership. If school leaders can only think of financial resources to be gained from partnership with churches, then that school isn't ready to build community partnerships, Jordan warned.

- Partners can see The Partnering Toolbook's Build a Resource Map ([thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/toolbook-series/the-partnering-toolbook/](https://thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/toolbook-series/the-partnering-toolbook/)) and its discussion (found on pages 13-14) for guidance and a template to help identify the financial and non-financial resources partners bring to the collaboration. Also see Tool 4: Partnering Roles and Skills Questionnaire, which partners can use to assess whether the collaboration possesses skills in areas such as facilitation and evaluation.

# FOR FURTHER READING



## From The Intersector Project Toolkit:

- Share a Vision of Success: The agreement on a set of project goals and ideal outcomes that clarify the mission and priorities of the collaboration ([intersector.com/toolkit/share-a-vision-of-success/](https://intersector.com/toolkit/share-a-vision-of-success/))
- Account for Resources: The determination of financial and non-financial resources from existing and potential partners ([intersector.com/toolkit/account-for-resources/](https://intersector.com/toolkit/account-for-resources/))

## From Intersector Insights:

- Can a faith-based cross-sector partnership be a partnership of equals? ([intersector.com/researcher-insights-can-a-faith-based-cross-sector-partnership-be-a-partnership-of-equals/](https://intersector.com/researcher-insights-can-a-faith-based-cross-sector-partnership-be-a-partnership-of-equals/))

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Academic research often holds knowledge that can benefit the many practitioners working in cross-sector collaborations. For our Research to Practice series ([intersector.com/tag/research-to-practice/](https://intersector.com/tag/research-to-practice/)), we examine these articles and interview their authors to highlight key facts, actionable takeaways, and additional resources practitioners can turn to for guidance in their cross-sector work.

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