

# Overview of the Guide to Working With External Providers



The 2010 updated version of the *Guide to Working With External Providers* offers a step-by-step approach to researching and selecting a high-quality service provider, establishing an effective partnership agreement, and evaluating the success of the partnership. It digs beneath the surface and explains how actual schools and districts have successfully negotiated agreements that result in true partnerships. It also addresses strategies for providers that are building new relationships with schools.

Productive partnerships between schools and external providers are built on strong foundations. One fundamental building block is clarity—a clear

understanding of what the partnership will entail, the expectations that each party has of one another, and an awareness that the partnership will evolve over time. Another important building block is communication—a commitment on the part of all parties to provide ongoing feedback to one another and to assess and improve the partnership as the work unfolds.

Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes of Research, developed the *Guide to Working With External Providers* to help schools and providers get started on the right foot together to develop successful partnerships.

## High-Quality Provider Services

Although current research does not provide a clear list of the most critical characteristics of high-quality provider services, five characteristics do appear consistently in the research. In order to avoid the failures experienced by so many schools, all schools and districts hiring an external provider should make sure that the provider offers services with the following characteristics:

- **Aligned With Established Goals.** All plans and activities should be aligned with goals that were established by the school or district during the needs assessment and the school or district improvement processes.
- **Long Term.** The provider's services should be offered as part of a long-term strategy for improved student learning. The provider should be candid about the fact that making changes to affect student learning is a complex and difficult task that takes time.
- **Customized.** The provider should be prepared to tailor its approach to the school or district's unique circumstances and needs. The provider

also should have a viable plan to get buy-in from key stakeholders.

- **Research Based.** The provider's approach should be grounded in research and backed by evidence that it gets the desired results in similar circumstances. Ideally, this evidence of effectiveness should come from scientific research but often no such research exists. In such cases, evidence could take the form of strong anecdotes of effectiveness, references from successful users of the approach, and other indications that the approach is "best practice."
- **Capacity Building.** All services should be delivered with a strategy for training the school or district to be able to practice and assess these skills independently. The provider should have a plan for building capacity at the school or district level and evidence that it has accomplished this goal in the past. These capacity-building services could take the form of a trainer-of-trainers model, annual "brush-up" trainings, and/or codevelopment of services with a site-based professional development design team.

## Checklist for Creating Partnerships With School and External Providers

The *Guide to Working With External Providers* is divided into six main sections. Each section addresses a number of vital issues to consider as you forge and manage relationships with external providers. Within each section is a series of steps, which offer a discussion of the issue under consideration. Each step is discussed in more detail in the full guide. Practical tools also are provided.

### Get Started

- Know your school or district needs.
- Plan your budget.
- View the landscape of external partners.

### Create a Framework for the Selection Process

- Put together a selection team; develop criteria for the selection process.
- Write a request for proposal (RFP). (See **Tool 1: RFP Worksheet.**)
- Find potential providers, and research your choices. (See **Tool 2: Prospective Provider Information Sheet.**)

### Vet and Select a Provider

- Conduct initial conversations.
- Check references. (See **Tool 3: Prospective Provider Rating Sheet.**)
- Reach an agreement on a provider.

### Negotiate a Contract

- Clarify the package of services and materials supplied by the provider. (See **Tool 4: Provider Services and Materials Questionnaire** and **Tool 5: Gap Analysis.**)
- Determine the actions and support provided by the school and district. (See **Tool 6: Provider Costs Questionnaire**, **Tool 7: Provider Preferences for Supportive School-Level Policies**, and **Tool 8: Provider Preferences for Supportive District-Level Policies.**)
- Determine contract length.
- Determine outcomes and evaluation measures.

### Work in Partnership

- Create the school or district implementation plan.
- Address common issues that arise during implementation.
- Establish an evaluation plan. (See **Tool 9: School or District Evaluation of Provider Services** and **Tool 10: Provider Evaluation of School or District Implementation.**)

### Plan for the Future

- Reshape the relationship after the natural end of the contract.
- Sustain the work.
- Terminate partnerships that do not meet expectations.

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The *Guide to Working With External Providers* is available online at [http://www.learningpt.org/pdfs/External\\_Provider\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.learningpt.org/pdfs/External_Provider_Guide.pdf).