Assessing the Environment for Collaboration 

Excerpt from Fostering Collaboration Between District and Charter Schools:   
A Toolkit for State and Local Leaders

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**Description:**  
Prior to planning a pilot or formal collaboration, each partnering organization should take stock of the assets it can bring to the effort and should also consider the potential pitfalls and barriers to the effort. This section describes the self-assessment process and provides a self-assessment tool.

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Assessing the Environment for Collaboration from Fostering Collaboration Between District and Charter Schools

A Toolkit for State and Local Leaders

## B. Assessing the Environment for Collaboration

Prior to planning a pilot or formal collaboration, each partnering organization should take stock of the assets it can bring to the effort and should also consider the potential pitfalls and barriers to the effort. The partnering organizations should then share and discuss the findings from their self-assessments. Sharing these self-assessment findings will help partners assess whether they are poised to be good collaborative partners; reflect on the benefits of collaborating; clarify the capacities that each group will commit to the collaboration; and take note of any gaps in capacity that will need to be addressed.

In some cases, the costs of a collaboration may outweigh the benefits.[[1]](#footnote-1) Collaboration requires significant investment of time and resources, particularly where there is political opposition. Therefore, if the benefits to students and families are insufficient, the group may decide to tackle a different problem or opportunity. The self‑assessment process is a good time to make that determination.

The self-assessment process also lays a foundation for formal planning and can create a baseline for measuring the progress of the partnership. The Related Tools section below includes the *Self‑Assessment Tool: Assessing Environment for Collaboration* (page 13), which is based on the four dimensions of collaboration; factors highlighted in the tool are based on research about collaboration.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Related Tools for Assessing the Environment for Collaboration

Self-Assessment Tool: Assessing environment for Collaboration

The *Self-Assessment Tool* provides an opportunity to take stock of partners’ readiness for collaboration and will help the partners determine next steps to address gaps in readiness. Each section of the self-assessment includes factors that are known to be important in collaboration; each factor is accompanied by descriptive examples and a suggested rating scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, not applicable). At the end of each section is an opportunity to reflect on the team members’ ratings, to determine the steps that might be taken to strengthen readiness for collaboration.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***Instructions.*** First, each partner should *independently* complete the self‑assessment. Next, all partners should come together to discuss their ratings and suggested steps, if any, to strengthen readiness and assess the feasibility of the collaboration.

UNIFYING PURPOSE

| Factors | Explanatory Statements | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Applicable |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. We have identified a mutual problem or concern that could be addressed by working together | * There is an authentic problem/concern/ opportunity that we’ve identified, which is at the heart of the collaboration (e.g., a known curricular weakness, professional development, or grant opportunity) * There’s mutual understanding of the problem |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We have a vision of what collaboration might look like | * We have a sense of who the optimal partners would be, how decisions would be made, what the goals could be, and approximately what it might take to succeed |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We can see clear benefits that might accrue from working together | * We can define benefits for students and families from working together on the problem/ opportunity (e.g., improved achievement results, additional course options) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We can state a specific purpose and objectives for collaboration | * There is a unique purpose for working together |  |  |  |  |  |

SUMMARY OF RATINGS FOR UNIFYING PURPOSE

| Current Status:  We’re ready for next steps/in good shape here | Current Status: We need to do some work here before launching an effort | Next Steps |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

ENVIRONMENT FOR COLLABORATION

| Factors | Explanatory Statements | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Applicable |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. We have a history of collaboration or cooperation among the potential partners | * Schools of different types in our community have a history of working together * Cross-sector collaborations have been commonly used to work on solving problems in our district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We have experienced events that might negatively impact success | * The community has experienced one or more events that have placed charter and district schools on opposing sides of an issue (e.g., disagreements over use of a facility) * Schools are dealing with issues that are overwhelming their current abilities to take on collaboration (e.g., severe budget cuts, major staff transitions) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We have key champions in the community | * People in positions of influence in the community (e.g., mayor, school superintendent) explicitly encourage collaboration * People in positions of influence in the community have deep connections to both the district and charters |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Public opinion in our community generally favors options | * When provided with the opportunity, the community has expressed openness (e.g., voting preferences, opinion polling) to providing a range of education options |  |  |  |  |  |

SUMMARY OF RATINGS FOR ENVIRONMENT FOR COLLABORATION

| Current Status:  We’re ready for next steps/in good shape here | Current Status: We need to do some work here before launching an effort | Next Steps |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTNERS

| Factors | Explanatory Statements | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Applicable |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Our team represents a cross-section of individuals who will be needed to make the collaboration work | * Members of the team represent the roles that are necessary to operationalize the collaboration (e.g., administrative decision-makers, lead teachers) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Our relationships with potential collaborators are open and honest | * Members of our team see that collaboration is in our self-interest * Members of our team have respect for and trust in our proposed collaborating partners * The leadership of our team is flexible/willing to compromise to achieve benefits |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We have an understanding of the skills/competencies needed for the desired goal of the collaboration | * We have a good idea of the skills and content expertise needed to accomplish the unique purpose (e.g., expertise in middle-grades math curricula, familiarity with scheduling software, instructional coaching) * We have experience participating in effective collaborations |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We know our own strengths and weaknesses related to the desired goal for collaboration | * We know what we can contribute to the collaboration and what the potential partner(s) can contribute * We know our areas of need related to the project |  |  |  |  |  |

SUMMARY OF RATINGS FOR CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTNERS

| Current Status:  We’re ready for next steps/in good shape here | Current Status: We need to do some work here before launching an effort | Next Steps |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

CAPACITY, RESOURCES, AND STRUCTURES

| Factors | Explanatory Statements | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Applicable |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. We are prepared to offer human resources to staff the collaboration | * We have staff who will carry out the project and have defined clear roles and responsibilities for them * We have staff who can manage and monitor the collaboration itself |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We can offer/obtain financial resources to support collaborative activities | * We are able to share the financial burden among partners |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We are ready to participate in a governance/decision-making structure to guide the collaboration | * We recognize that we will need to create a governance/decision-making structure for making the key decisions that guide collaborative activity; this may require a multistage decision-making process * Members of our team understand and buy into participating in a decision-making process |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. As needed, we are able to identify a neutral convener to facilitate the collaboration | * We know of potential partners who can serve as external facilitators |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. We have well-established and regular communication with potential partners | * We have formal and informal communication channels with potential partners * We have tools/resources to communicate our results externally |  |  |  |  |  |

SUMMARY OF RATINGS FOR CAPACITY, RESOURCES, AND STRUCTURES

| Current Status:  We’re ready for next steps/in good shape here | Current Status: We need to do some work here before launching an effort | Next Steps |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

1. Lake et al. (2017), p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Winer, M. B. (1994). *Collaboration handbook: Creating, sustaining, and enjoying the journey*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst Wilder Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Based in part on collaboration research tools in Winer (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)