

Establishing Relationships Between Schools and Municipalities

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As a grant writer, I often suggest to school districts that they develop a working relationship with their municipalities. To do this I will set up a meeting between the superintendent and school administrators: including some board of education members, the mayor and council members. My mission for this meeting is to develop a strategic plan with both short and long term goals that includes leveraging grant funds. Invariably, when I look around the table I will see tension on the faces of both sides, and a song begins to play in my head... maybe you know it: *The Farmer and Cowman Should be Friends* from the musical *Oklahoma* (lyrics by Oscar and Hammerstein).

In the musical, the group erupts into song at a community dance where everyone has gathered for the same reason: to have fun. But the dancers polarize into their respective roles of farmers and cowmen, and all over the same issue: fences. The cowmen don't want the fences, and the farmers need them to thrive. So, Aunt Eller jumps in the middle of the ensuing fight and begs the farmers and cowmen to be friends and to bring solidarity to the new State of Oklahoma. This is when she begins to sing:

“Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends.
One man likes to push a plough, the other likes to chase a cow,
But that's no reason why they can't be friends.
Territory folks should stick together,
Territory folks should all be pals.”

See my problem? I'm sitting around a table with school district administrators and elected municipal officials and each are protecting their own territory and all worked up over fences - I mean taxes! If the school district wants to grow, fix windows and roofs and hire additional teachers the mayor sees the tax rate go up. This cannot happen, even though the residents vote on any budget increase. When taxes go up residents will blame the mayor, after all. And when the mayor wants to keep the tax rate flat, the school worries that they cannot function because it will mean cuts in the services that they can offer to their students.

I refrain from singing out loud at these meetings and instead bring the discussion to finding funding opportunities which will allow the dance to go on. Just as in the musical, both parties are there for the same reason: the children of the community. At this point I will attempt to show them how educational grant opportunities for programmatic changes can be matched with municipal “bricks and mortar” grants, and the group generally begins to appreciate leveraging funding.

For example, by attaining multiple grants through district efforts (i.e., the federal grant *Improving Literacy through School Libraries* and the NJ Department of Energy's school

construction funding), along with the work of an aggressive mayor who sought municipal grants (i.e., the NJ Department of Community Affairs' *Small Cities* grant and other grants offered by the NJ Department of Transportation, NJ Department of Environmental Protection and through US Congress Appropriation), the Borough of Woodbine has been successful in obtaining monies that will benefit the entire community. In the coming month or so there will be a ground breaking ceremony for a new gymnasium, technology center and expanded library (an extension of the county library for the Woodbine elementary school).

Although I am yet to see an ending as happy as the one in the musical *Okalahoma* (with Curly marrying Laurie and driving off in the surrey with the fringe on top), each successful project between districts and municipalities does give me reason to sing "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning".

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