

Dr. Kineka Hull: Welcome to Elevate Youth Programming, a podcast for adolescent pregnancy prevention programs and other youth serving agencies. In each episode, we will discuss best practices, tips, and strategies to strengthen your programming. Each episode will cover a specific topic discussed with experts in the field and will address questions submitted by youth program providers. Listen along as our guests join me to discuss these relevant topics. [00:00:30] I'm your host, Dr. Kineka Hull. In this episode, we sat down with Debbie Herget and Edna Wallace from RTI International to discuss building and strengthening partnerships.

Debbie is a survey director in RTI's education and workforce development division. She has spent more than 25 years gaining access to and increasing participation from schools with various research studies. Edna leads [00:01:00] strategic partnership strategies for the education and workforce development division, where she has over 15 years of experience partnering with schools and school districts for a variety of projects and initiatives. So welcome to the Elevate Youth Programming podcast, Debbie and Edna. I'm excited to have you here today.

Edna Wallace: Thanks for having us.

Dr. Kineka Hull: A lot of our grantees partner with schools to make sure that we're able to implement health education in school or after school, [00:01:30] or sometimes in a community-based setting. And so today I'm looking forward to having a fantastic discussion about ways that they can better partner with schools to make sure that we are giving the youth information that they need to make sure they have successful health outcomes. Over the past two years now, we've all been dealing with the pandemic and there have been a variety of ways that we've been having to implement health education. And so as we start preparing for the next school year, [00:02:00] what are some ways that our grantees needs to start thinking about ways to successfully partner with schools to deliver face to face, virtual or hybrid programming?

Edna Wallace: So this is Edna and I can start. So, I think an important thing to keep in mind is just where schools are universally. Well, each school is probably in a slightly different place. I think broadly across education we're seeing a lot of stress in our school systems right now, COVID was really difficult [00:02:30] on school and district leaders, teachers, school building leaders, and we're starting to see a lot of those ramifications come forward in terms of gaps in student learning, social, emotional stressors on students that are leading to disruptions in class and behavior challenges. And so my recommendation would be anybody that's seeking to establish partnerships with schools have deep empathy for what these leaders are trying to go through, what they're trying to do right now, and know that they [00:03:00] have a lot of pressing priorities and that it is not that your item is not important or is not a priority, but they have a lot.

So I would really try and understand where they are, what their needs are and help try to figure out how you can fit into what their existing priorities are and be understanding of when they might have conflicts, or not be able to do

precisely what you want to do, but you know, try and see how can your program be modified so it can [00:03:30] meet their needs.

Debbie Herget:

And I can just build on that to what you were asking specifically with regard to, how to interact with schools in the varied settings. So in a in person, a virtual and a hybrid environment, and one of the things that we are seeing is schools are reluctant to shut down again. And so we do think that modifying programming for all of the different types of school delivery [00:04:00] may have different levels of need and may not be as needed in a virtual environment. We see schools seeing the impact that the virtual instruction had on its students, on its teachers, and they're shying away from it.

So, we may see some temporary shutdowns of classrooms, we may see, you know, if there are high incidences of recurrence in the pandemic, I think they would try to, from what we're hearing and what we're seeing, [00:04:30] try to minimize the overall disruption and minimize any attempt to go back to a hundred percent virtual instructional setting. That's not to say there aren't some schools that you know, may do that out of necessity. And we would hope that would be temporary just given the impact that, that has had on the schools and the students.

Dr. Kineka Hull:

Thank you. That's helpful. A couple of things that you both said stood out to me. So the first is that, of course we feel like our programing is important, but because we are going into a school setting, [00:05:00] their priority is student learning and trying to make sure that they are addressing any gaps, especially when it comes to coming into the classroom, outside of the pandemic. And so if you are a listener, please stay tuned for our next episode, that talks about how to modify or adapt your programming as Debbie suggested with fidelity. So you get some great tips about that, but how can we still be relevant to administrators?

And so I know a lot of school districts have [00:05:30] some type of health curriculum and a lot of what we do supplements that, but when the priority is so high and rightfully so on student learning, how can we assure them, we are here to help, what we have isn't aligned with what you are doing for student outcomes, to just make sure that we're emphasizing the importance of what we have and that we're able to modify it and adapt it to be whatever the school may desire it [00:06:00] to be?

Edna Wallace:

Sure. So I think that there are some ways that programs can ensure that they have alignment with districts. I think first knowing that each school district has to follow the standards that are set by the state. So either the state education agency, or the state board of education adopt standards, and there are health standards that are included in that. So I would be somewhat familiar with what your schools are expected from the state's perspective [00:06:30] to be teaching each child. And then I would know how your program supports meeting those standards that the state is set. I think that's the first thing.

Edna Wallace: The second thing is once those standards are set, it is up to each district to then determine what curriculum they're going to use. So what are those readings, materials, resources that they're going to use to teach students that then meet those standards? So if you can and are able, and these are usually public documents that you can find on district websites that list the curriculum that they [00:07:00] use. Typically you can find it, I would look to see what materials they are using to meet their health standards.

Debbie Herget: And so, Edna, I fully agree with everything that you said. And so I will take the response in a slightly different direction. And that is how do you get in with that content area? Because I think that, you know, you're right, how do you adapt your curriculum to what the school already needs to do? How do you make yourself relevant there? But then the other issue [00:07:30] is getting in the door when these schools and the school staff are very overburdened with a wealth of things that they need to cover throughout the day, throughout the weeks. And so we're finding that teachers are very overwhelmed that they are covering for other teachers, there's a lot of teacher shortage that is happening in the schools.

Debbie Herget: So one of the ways to really partner with the schools is to provide an opportunity [00:08:00] for a shared delivery in such a way that we take the burden off of the teachers, but if we can come in and deliver on behalf of the teachers, allowing the teachers time to either cover other classes, to have those planning periods that they're sorely lacking right now, basically, you know, it's more of a give than a take, it's the more we ask schools to do the more stress they feel, but the more that we can [00:08:30] put this on them as a way that we can help, a way that we can take on the delivery, a way that, you know, really minimizes their burden, that is another way to help get in the door and get that partnership across.

Dr. Kineka Hull: So, two things that you mentioned, Debbie and Edna, stood out to me. The first is being able to deliver, right? So, giving teachers an opportunity to do other things and as health educators, we deliver the information. [00:09:00] And the other is being sensitive to aligning what we have to offer with the current curriculum. So given the recent focus on what is taught in the classroom and the fact that we are covering what is perceived as sensitive information, what kind of conversations should we be having, and how should we be planning and thinking to approach schools that allow for a transparent and productive partnership?

Debbie Herget: Whenever we are talking [00:09:30] to schools in particular about sensitive topics, being a hundred percent forthcoming and open and honest is critical, making sure that schools fully understand the content that will be delivered, what is non-negotiable, what can be modified? What are the options given the different political and sensitive feelings that people have about specific topics? One thing to point out is that this [00:10:00] is not necessarily limited to

sensitive health topics necessarily. It's not just a sex education concern, for example, it's not, you know, we're seeing this in our surveys, schools are hesitant to participate in any outside activities right now that could have the perception of being sensitive in nature. And the definition of sensitive has become more broad in [00:10:30] recent weeks and months in particular.

And so this is not an area that is unique to what our grantees are trying to accomplish, but this is something that people are seeing across the board and even within schools, as schools try to navigate ,you know, what they've been teaching for years with what is now considered acceptable to the masses. And by the masses I mean, even if it's a vocal minority, there are a number [00:11:00] of people who are leading the narrative and it's causing people to take caution.

Edna Wallace: Yeah. I agree with what Debbie said. I mean, there are things that we have done in the past, like student perception surveys that are really valuable too, that are now considered to be more controversial, and schools and districts are limiting their use. So I, a hundred percent echo that it is not limited to just the work that you are trying to advance, we're seeing this across the board on a number of different fronts. And [00:11:30] I echo what Debbie said about trying to be as transparent as possible. I think one of the things that you really want to avoid, which would really break down trust, is if you catch your school or district partner off guard by something that they are not aware of that's in your curriculum or your program.

Edna Wallace: So, I would certainly be as transparent as I possibly could. I would certainly highlight for them, I would be very proactive and I would highlight for them possible areas that could be concerning for some. [00:12:00] And I would certainly listen to their perspective around what could work and what could be problematic within their school context. Do you know that schools serve very different constituents and some things even within the same district might be acceptable in one school and not acceptable in another? And I would really trust your partners to help guide you and shape your program so that it can meet the needs of that school. I definitely understand that your programs are evidence based and that you have to stick [00:12:30] to the research on what works. And that's why you're a part of this program. But if there are any modifications that you can make to meet your local school context, I think that, that would be very helpful.

Dr. Kineka Hull: I think that's key to partnership, right? We are bringing a certain expertise, the school has certain expertise. We have to find a way to make it meet. So let your partner lead you to make sure that you're doing what is best for the youth in their district. As a former classroom teacher, I taught high school for a couple of years before I moved to [00:13:00] doing research. And I remember my very first sexual health education grant. I actually had to go in front of the school board in an open meeting and go through the entire curriculum. And we went line by line with some of the texts and saying, you know, [00:13:14] "Cross this out, this will not work for our district, replace it with this," but that was helpful,

right? So I was able to be sure that I was able to get my foot in the door, like Debbie said, that's important. Get in. And until you build that trust, you may be limited [00:13:30] with some of the things that you're able to do. So you maintain fidelity as much as you can.

And once that trust is built and that transparency, I know over the four years of my grant, I started with no condom demonstration, certain terms couldn't be used, but after two years of working in the district, the parents trusted me, the district trusted me. And so the reigns loosened a little bit. So I was able to include more content. And so I think that's very important, meeting your stakeholders where they are to make sure that everybody gets [00:14:00] out of the partnership, what they need, especially the young people.

So, something else that you mentioned about empathy for schools, I know that everyone has their goal, and our goal is to get in the school and provide education. But the goal right now for schools are almost survival because you're coming after the pandemic, you're trying to make sure that students have their basic educational needs met, as Debbie said, teachers are already strained. The idea of having to accommodate one more [00:14:30] thing is a lot for everyone right now. So what are some ways that we can show empathy for schools and educators and administrators to make the partnership a little bit easier to get our foot in the door?

Debbie Herget:

A lot of it is in terms of just the narrative, the discussions that you're having with the school, it's treading lightly, it's coming in and having the discussions, leading with the "How are you, how is the school coping? What are your needs?" before [00:15:00] the, ask for the partnership, kind of, setting that stage before you are saying, this is the program that we would like to bring to the schools. One of the things that schools really look for is what is the burden of what you are asking, and what is the direct benefit? That goes back to one of the things that I had said earlier, in terms of how is the delivery going to happen? Is it possible for the grantee [00:15:30] to come in and conduct that delivery? Does that free up the school in some way? Are there other ways, other tools, other resources that the grantee might have to provide supports to the schools?

So I think it really is, as Edna mentioned, every school is different. What they're facing, what they're coming back to post-pandemic is different. And so there is not a single conversation that we can tell you to have, but it really [00:16:00] is getting to know the context within the school, talking to the right people at the school, identifying the people with the content interest, the people with the curriculum interest that matches the program, which could be different people in different schools and school districts, and to really empathize by just conversing with them, what is your experience? What are you experiencing now? What are your needs? How can we work together to accomplish both of our goals?

Edna Wallace:

[00:16:30] So I think for me, I always try and keep in mind when I am trying to partner with the district, that their job is much harder than mine. And so when I

think about the stresses that they're under, and maybe if I'm trying to connect with a principal, you know, there's a national school bus driver shortage. So, that principal may have been up early driving a bus, like it is not out of the realm of possibility that they are driving buses then coming to work and trying to lead a school [00:17:00] and then driving buses again.

So, I really have to be empathetic and understanding that, you know what? Maybe my email is not their top priority and be understanding of the response time might be a little bit longer. I'm going to politely be persistent, but very understanding that I am not their highest priority at the moment. And really, as Debbie said, be leading with what I can offer, not necessarily what I want, but really try and be humbled in my approach [00:17:30] that knowing, even though I have an extremely strong evidence based program, it might not be the most important thing that's on that school leader's mind.

Dr. Kineka Hull: I remember being a grantee and teachers and guidance counselors were my closest friends. They would help me with the participants on the bus ride home after school. I learned that paper and dry erase markers are worth their weight in gold when it comes to a lot of the teachers. And so just, you know, again, like you said, what do I have to offer that can make [00:18:00] this lift worth it? So we know that it's worth it for the youth, with the program, but just making sure that we make it beneficial for the administrators and the teachers as well. What other skills or attributes have you found helpful, or would you think our grantees would find helpful when it comes to getting their foot in the door to deliver programming?

Debbie Herget: I alluded to this in the last topic, but really think that identifying the right individuals to talk to at the district, or the school, [00:18:30] to get your foot in the door. In this case, whether it's starting with the principal, with the health education lead, making friends with the right people and getting the big picture for that department, getting the buy-in from individuals that have that curriculum content knowledge and expertise and interest. That is typically a really great way to get yourself in the door, but also identifying what we can do in terms [00:19:00] of giving, as opposed to an ask.

Debbie Herget: Kineka, you had mentioned going in with pencils and dry erase markers, and those little things go such a long way. Schools are experiencing a large amount of turnover right now. And so the gentle persistence that Edna had mentioned earlier, we want to make sure that we are constantly and continuously having conversations with the schools, knowing who the players are, making sure that we are in the loop [00:19:30] on anything that may be changing, and continuing those relationships with anyone who may take over in those roles so that we can ensure that the partnership and the curriculum continues.

Edna Wallace: So, I would also add to that, you know, if we're trying to build strong relationships with our schools, if you are an afterschool provider, I think that's a really important service to the school. We know that to address a lot of the learning gaps that students are facing, and to address a lot of the social and

[00:20:00] emotional needs that students have, we're going to need more time. The school day just has to be longer, and the schools by themselves cannot do that. So they need really strong and robust after school partners. The research on the value of strong after school programs is really, really robust and that it really can help drive academic gains. So, if I were an afterschool provider in this situation, I would be thinking about that too. And how can you incorporate maybe perhaps some social and emotional supports [00:20:30] that students need into your program as well? I think that, that's going to really help schools, and I would help them see that you are trying to bridge some of those gaps that you know that they have because they cannot program all day long, and that you can help support.

The other thing I would really think about if you are a professional development provider, that is particularly tough right now, because teachers are really, really stretched. And so districts are trying to take any of those teacher workdays that they [00:21:00] already have on the books. And they've got something coming down the line that they want to train their teachers on. If you are an afterschool provider, I would be looking at partnerships with the district more so than I think I would for an individual school, because the district is going to start to drive a lot of professional development activities. It used to be that there was a little more flexibility and school building leaders would have more say, but because of all the immense needs that we're seeing right now, a lot of professional development is really being centralized [00:21:30] at the district level. So I would think about that. And I would really think about anything that has to deal with professional development, how are you compensating teachers? Because they feel like if they're putting in extra time and effort, there should be extra compensation for the hours that they're contributing.

So if you have after school PD, or weekend PD, I would think about some compensation for them because that is a driver, if you're not already doing so already.

Dr. Kineka Hull: Thank you. That's very useful information. I know, as a former grantee, I actually [00:22:00] enjoyed my after school sessions more. There are a lot of young people who are not inclined to sports. And so having something after school keeps them engaged throughout the day, keeps them out of trouble sometimes after school. And so I just really enjoy that. And even the young people who wanted to do sports, we would do a makeup session sometimes before school, just to make sure that they were still able to get the information. So thank you for that. So right now there is a lot of emphasis on [00:22:30] community and parental perception on the type of information that we may deliver during schools. Do you have any advice or recommendations on how to navigate some of those changes?

Edna Wallace: I think that this is a tricky topic. Yes. I think there is growing research on that strong family and caregiver engagement really does accelerate student learning. So there is so much evidence that shows that you know, you really should be engaging family members [00:23:00] or caregivers when possible. Some of the

challenges that we're seeing now that schools and districts are facing is that those who are necessarily challenging some of their practices aren't necessarily parents or caregivers to students in the system. So that's a really tricky road to try and navigate of how you open yourself up for feedback when perhaps the people who are providing feedback, aren't the ones who are being impacted by your program. I would say again, as we've reiterated, this is not for your [00:23:30] program specifically, we are seeing this universally in terms of all types of areas in education right now.

I work with several school districts and they are really trying to consider how they're collecting feedback from the public because they serve, of course, the community at large, but how are they ensuring that they're really getting the voices of parents, families, and caregivers with a particular focus on those communities who might be more marginalized? So I would offer, if you have any [00:24:00] suggestions to schools on how to reach out to families, I would really offer those. I love working with schools. They tend not to be the best at parents and community engagement. They just aren't. They have so many other things on their plate. So I actually think that, that is something, if you feel that you have really strong connection to families and caregivers, and you can offer that as a resource, I actually think that, that's a really strong offering for schools.

Dr. Kineka Hull:

So I [00:24:30] think that what you said, we think it's just us, because there's been so much emphasis right now, and it's such a hot topic around reproductive health and the health education that we provide. But as Debbie said, the phrase sensitive information, or tough information, is much broader now. And so I think we hone in on what impacts us, not necessarily thinking that not only is it impacting us, it's impacting the schools [00:25:00] and then some. And so when we come with our questions, or we're coming to partner, we may not, at that time, be the highest priority in the grand scheme of things. So I think that's very helpful for our listeners to realize it's not us, it's a tough time for everyone. And we have to find the best way to partner.

So, with that said, what are some key barriers that we should be thinking about when it comes to [00:25:30] partners not saying yes? So we talked about staff shortages. We talked about competing priorities. We talked about the varying legislation, not just that, that impacts us, it has to be incorporated and thought about from the school's side so that when we come with what we have to offer and provide, it's not seen as a burden, but it's seen as a beneficial partnership.

Edna Wallace:

So I think you have to think about, this isn't necessarily a barrier, but it's really more of [00:26:00] what are the incentives for schools? So what are they incentivized to do? I think in many, many states are accountability grades, they're letter grades that are given to schools, and those are really drivers of what schools pay attention to. Oftentimes it's test scores that are the biggest factor, but in some states they do have really comprehensive systems for reviewing schools. So things such as attendance, chronic absenteeism could be included. And if you have a really robust [00:26:30] after school program that has been showing results in improving absenteeism, which a lot of times after

school programs can do, and you're in a state that is one of the factors that schools are graded on, I would lift stuff like that to show how I am being helpful. I think really just knowing what are the incentives and what are the drivers for a school. And oftentimes it's just public accountability models.

Debbie Herget: I absolutely agree with that. We could sit here and list a myriad of challenges that schools are [00:27:00] facing right now. And it's not necessarily the area of focus. We know that they're facing turnover, we know that they're facing disciplinary challenges with the students. We know that the students are catching up after a long period of time outside of school, or in a different school environment. There are so many things. And so, so it does really go back to everything that Edna was just saying, what are their priorities in terms of catching back up, in terms of making sure that their schools and their students are successful, [00:27:30] and how do we fit into those areas? How do we make sure that what we are offering and what our program is delivering really meets those same needs and identifies with those same goals?

Dr. Kineka Hull: So, that is a great segue into our submitted question from a grantee. And so we talked about how staff shortages and changes the response to, and as we are hopefully exiting out of COVID, and how that [00:28:00] makes it very hard to engage and stay relevant with partners, especially schools. And so you've given us some ideas about reconnecting and reenergizing those partnerships, but just based on our conversation today, it's evident that what a lot of us use, which is that email, is not probably the best way to get on someone's radar. So what would you suggest would be a good way to reconnect with a partner, or seek out new partners, [00:28:30] just to make sure that we are able to get on their radar?

Debbie Herget: I'm not sure exactly where the grantees are in relation to where the schools are that they would like to serve. The extent to which face to face interaction can happen, there are definite benefits to that in terms of not only building those relationships, but also in all honesty, it's easier to say no when you are behind email, when you are on [00:29:00] the telephone, when you are not in somebody's face, when you are not right-.

Dr. Kineka Hull: It's so true.

Debbie Herget: ... there in front of them, and you're going to make more headway if you are there in person, if that is a possibility, we know that's not going to be possible everywhere, but to the extent that it is, I would strongly recommend it.

Edna Wallace: So I actually use email a lot, it's the most efficient way to communicate with folks, but I like to, if I'm emailing somebody new, make that email as warm as possible. So I would really, [00:29:30] if I'm trying to expand, really think about, do I have a teacher advocate, maybe in another school, or a principal advocate in another school, that can make that warm introduction to me over email? Just so that there is somebody else that is advocating for me and my program so I don't have to necessarily do it. So I would really try and think about who are

those established relationships you already have, because you already have some, and who can [00:30:00] make those warm introductions to you, or bridges for you to where you want to go?

Dr. Kineka Hull: Thank you. This has been excellent information. I've enjoyed our conversation. As we wrap up, are there any key takeaways or last minute thoughts that you would like to leave for our listeners?

Edna Wallace: Gosh, I mean, I think it's just keep going. I know how hard it is to partner with schools right now. It's really, really hard and they really need all the support that they can get. And I would like to leave you with, I know we've talked a lot about what school priorities are. I don't think I know a school [00:30:30] district, or a school building leader who doesn't think this type of work is important and necessary. They really do. But I try and think about it as, you know, being a working mom as well. There are only so many things I can get to in the day, and I'm doing my best to get to all of them, but I'm not a hundred percent sure I've done everything I need to do, but, you know, I'm doing my best and they are doing their best.

So it is not that they don't find your program valuable, or they can't see why kids would need it, they're just trying to [00:31:00] feed the closest alligator that's in front of them and take care of the most urgent things that are on fire. And so, I really don't want to leave this conversation with you thinking that we don't think that school folks will find your programs important, I really think they do. I really think they know it. It's just, they just have very little capacity

Debbie Herget: And Edna, you took the words out of my mouth and I couldn't have said it any better. So thank you for that.

Dr. Kineka Hull: Well, thank you both. This has been great information and I'm sure our listeners will find a lot of [00:31:30] things that they can use to strengthen, reinvigorate and get their foot in the door, or partnership with schools.

Debbie Herget: Thank you for having us.

Dr. Kineka Hull: If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Elevate Youth Programming on your podcast platform of choice. For information on today's topic and resources in adolescent pregnancy prevention, visit The Exchange at teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov. [00:32:00]

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