

Focusing Work and Responding to Partner Concerns

Participating on an Advisory Board, engaging with students, and working with teachers and students may be a new role for partners. They will have questions about how to successfully manage their roles and responsibilities.

- Develop an opening and on-going process for answering questions and dealing with uncertainty and problems. Deal with issues immediately.
- As often as possible, have written guidelines for activities involving students. Concerns often focus on scheduling. It is important that every activity be assigned to a specific teacher who will organize it, contact the partner, and maintain contact until the activity is completed

Example: For a job shadowing event at a local company, develop a handout for the hosts that includes specific information:

- Students full names
- Responsible school staff
- Mode of transportation and arrival/departure time
- Copy of pre-job shadow academic or technical assignment
- Copy of questions students may ask
- Copy of assignment students will complete after the job shadow
- Reminders about logistics: restroom, lunch, etc.
- Phone numbers to call in emergency

Mission and Communications

It is essential that your WBL program has a mission statement to guide the work and keep stakeholders focused on the goals of the program. This mission statement can be created in collaboration with your Advisory Board, but should ultimately align with the goals and mission of the school. As a WBL Coordinator, it is your responsibility to guide this process so that it lands on a mission statement that it aligns and meets the needs of both the school and the program.

Once a mission statement is established, it is extremely important to ensure that this is placed at the center of all the work with your Advisory Board; this will ensure that the work being done, in some way, helps contribute to the mission. You should place your mission statement and goals on the top of meeting agendas. Not every meeting will have a direct connection to the mission, but the team should be able to see how it contributes to the larger picture and goals. Placing the mission statement at the top of the meeting agenda serves as an important visual reminder (anchor point) for Advisory members as items are discussed and decisions are made.

Ensuring conversations, and more importantly the tasks, contribute to the overall mission and progress towards achieving the goals set out is a key part to holding Advisory members accountable for the work they are committing to do. It's easy to serve on a board where there is not much to do. It is much harder to serve on a board that gives you homework. This work is meant to create and enhance learning experiences for our students. Advisory members should expect "homework." This "homework" can be clearly represented in meeting agendas that mention, "ITEMS TO BE COMPLETED," or "Next STEPS" at the bottom of the meeting

agenda. Notate on the meeting agenda the names of people who are responsible for completing tasks and followup at the next meeting. This kind of structure holds people accountable to the work and reinforces time frames that need to be met. Be transparent with your stakeholders that this work can be challenging and requires time-commitment at times; at the same time, reinforce that their contributions are directly impacting the quality of education for students.

At the end of the day, if a well defined communications plan is agreed upon by your Advisory, stick to it. Understand, as time passes, changes will occur, and that is okay. At various times, advisory members may have specific needs that they want met that you will have to address at various points of your relationship. One of the key recommendations is that when handling partner or Advisory members' concerns, realize that relationship building is the career field we specialize in as educators. Similar to our students, we can create positive experiences and environments for community partners by doing some of the following things:

- Listen to listen, not to respond
- Ask clarifying questions
- Tack conflict by being open and honest – again sticking to the mission
- Build relationships through team building activities, getting to know each other exercises and other team strategies
- Address SEL needs at the beginning of meetings
- Provide clear and concise communications
- End meetings with a task for various stakeholders and address them at every meeting
 - Share the meeting agenda after the meeting/or used a shared meeting format

Finally, at the end of each year, it is important to revisit roles and responsibilities during meeting time. Plan time on the agenda for this. Review what has been accomplished and have Board members develop a new plan for expanded roles, responsibilities, and goals for the upcoming year. Involving them in this process will further enhance commitment to accomplishing the goals and enhancing the WBL program.

Stick to the Mission

Oftentimes in the work of Work-Based Learning, educators, Advisory members, and community groups will find themselves walking down the path of a “rabbit hole,” a place that often leads to conflicting messaging, confusion, or even abrasive conversations. While tough conversations are necessary between stakeholders at times, they should not be the status quo of this work. This is especially true if there is a well defined mission of the work you are and processes for communication and addressing concerns. Being up front and honest on how the Advisory board can move forward the mission of the school's WBL programming is key.

When we put students first (as opposed to individual needs), we put our education system at the center of everything we do; economically, politically, socially, financially, legally and so on. Oftentimes, when we make financial or legal decisions, it can be challenging to keep the goal of putting “students first” at the forefront of the decision making process.

When responding to Advisory members or partners who have a concern, stick to the mission of your work and shared values that your advisory agreed to at the onset of the formation of the Advisory. Reference your group values and your mission at various stages of communication. These reference points help to ensure focus is on what is best for students and how your WBL program can provide students with quality learning experiences.